

Mirage of Blaze volume 2: Traces of Scarlet

Kuwabara Mizuna

Prologue: A Drizzling Night

A soundless rain was falling.

It had started that evening, but turned into a drizzle sometime after midnight.

A young man stood by the window in his room, listening to the sounds of the city in the deep night beyond the glass.

His lips suddenly tightened.

"... Kinue?"

Behind the youth stood an auraless man dressed in stained work clothes which looked as if he had come straight from a job at a construction site. He appeared to have been caught in the rain—he was soaked from the shoulders down, and droplets of water dripped from the rubber boots he wore into the carpet.

"I have come to give my report."

"Mmm."

The youth turned for the first time. "Have you learned anything further of [Takeda Shingen](#) 's activities?"

"Yes. After the events at [Matsumoto](#) , he gathered his remaining forces from [Koufu](#) and established an army; it seems that he is now poised to seize the northern [Kantou region](#) ."

"The northern Kantou region? So he's planning to go north?"

"Perhaps. In addition, it seems that he has added the remainder of the Sanada spirits around [Ueno](#) ([Gunma Prefecture](#)). No strong [onshou](#) have yet appeared from there, so it may well be that more and more spirits are bending to him out of fear."

The youth pondered for a moment. "I see. That damned Shingen. Is he planning to take the North?"

"What shall we do?"

"We will hold off attacking for the moment. We still have [Suruga's](#) ([Shizuoka Prefecture](#)) Imagawa to deal with. Let us leave him alone for now. Kinue. Continue to investigate."

"As you command. There is one matter more that I would like to bring to your attention."

"? What is it?"

"Regarding Shingen's uprising in [Matsumoto](#) . I do not doubt that you have already heard it said that it was the Uesugi who put him in check."

The youth's brows secretly knit. "If you are speaking of the remnants of the Uesugi—the [kanshousha](#) who survived—I have heard about them. To remain even now through all

their bitter experiences, when it seems that they continue to bear

their sentences as [onryou](#) —It takes some nerve, does it not?" But the youth added, "[Uesugi's Meikai Army](#) was destroyed by our hand thirty years ago. After [Kagetora](#) 's death those who remained became little more than a disorganized mob. I

did not think that they would be able to do anything..."

"That was perhaps true of the remnants. But what if Kagetora appeared once more?"

"What?" The youth involuntarily glared at him. "Are you saying that Kagetora has performed [kanshou](#) ?"

"From a report by a [nue](#) who saw the situation in [Matsumoto](#) in minute detail. On that occasion it seems Shingen was caught by what looked like Uesugi's [kekkaichoubuku](#) ."

"It wasn't [Naoe](#) ?"

"No. There was another with Naoe. The person directly responsible was this other."

"And you're saying that it was Kagetora?"

"If you will permit. Though the [choubuku](#) failed and Shingen eventually made good his brilliant escape, there is

but one who comes to mind who could have so easily checked [Takeda Shingen](#) ..."

"_"



The youth sank into a grim silence.

The man awaited his command.

The youth quietly closed his eyes.

"Damn Kagetora. That he could perform [kanshou](#) after receiving so grievous a wound from Lord [Nobunaga](#) ..."

"What shall we do?"

"We must first make certain. If it truly is Kagetora, then before Lord Nobunaga awakens we must take him out of the picture—be rid of him for good. For he will surely attempt to overthrow the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>.

"..."

"We must nip any potentially harmful influences to the fulfillment of our Great Plan in the bud."

"Then I shall go at once."

"No," he commanded. "I will go. If our opponent is Kagetora, then you of the **nue** would not stand a chance against him. You'd be finished if you encountered their **choubuku** . Since <<**choubukuryoku** >> is ineffective against the **kanshousha** , I will be safe."

"But..."

"I also wish to see the shape of Kagetora's **kanshou** for myself. I will go," the youth flatly cut off all objections, and

asked, "Kinue. You know of Kagetora's current identity, do you not?"

"Yes. He is a student at a high school called **Jouhoku** within the city of **Matsumoto** . His current name is 'Ougi Takaya'."

"'Ougi Takaya'..." The youth smiled slightly. "A good name. But a name he will no longer be able to call himself."

"As you say." With a dull light in his eyes like the glint from a dead fish's pupils, the man said to the youth, "I wish the fortunes of war upon you, Ranmaru-sama."

"'Tis well." The youth crossed his arms firmly and glared out at the darkness beyond the window. "I will go to **Matsumoto** . We shall undertake this for Oda's sake."

Chapter 1: Stranger

It was a gorgeous morning in [Matsumoto](#) .

The Northern Alps glistened beneath a rare clear sky during a break in the rainy season. Puddles on the asphalt reflected the blue sky and the dew-and raindrop-drenched greenery sparkling bewitchingly in the early sunlight.

The growling exhaust from a black GSX-250R interrupted the chirping of the birds as it ran down one of the few straight car-ways.

The rider wore a short-sleeved shirt with bright brown trousers, identifying him as a student of [Jouhoku High](#) . Twisting the throttle, he peered again at his right rear-view mirror.

(What the hell is with that bike?)

Ougi Takaya, on the GSX, was starting to get annoyed.

Something weird had happened that morning, right after he'd left the house

A strange bike had started following him. He'd thought that it was just a coincidence that they were heading in the same direction, but the bike was tailing him too closely. So he had purposely decreased his speed, only to find that the bike was still keeping exactly the same distance between them.

The image reflected in the mirror indicated that the situation had changed not at all.

"Is he making fun of me?"

The traffic light ahead turned red.

Irritated, Takaya braked to a stop right at the line. The suspicious bike, which had stopped at the same distance diagonally behind him, now moved up parallel to him.

A quick sideways glance startled him.

(A woman...?)

Sauvage-style hair flowed from beneath her helmet down her back. Long, slim, black jeans-clad legs propped up the heavy bike. The rider was female.

She looked at him through her visor, then gave the surprised Takaya a thumbs-up and a gesture of invitation.

"Wh...?!"

Takaya was confused.

(What the hell does she want?)

The woman pointed at the traffic light. So she wanted to stoplight-race? A careful examination told him that the woman's machine was a Yamaha FZR-400. Judging from the difference in their engine displacement, there was no way he could beat her. She must know that he was riding a 250. But still she was gesturing at him in challenge.

(She really is making fun of me.)

Now he was completely annoyed.

It was 100 meters at most to the next traffic light. In a dash he had some chance.

(Why the hell not.)

In place of a reply Takaya revved his engine two, three times. The other rider also faced forward, her gaze riveted on the stoplight.

The pedestrian walk light turned red. *Click*. He switched from neutral to low gear. Both of them waited, measuring the moment in which the light would change, slipping into that intense trance before battle. All lights were red.

A long second.

Then—green!

Two engines roared fiercely. Both bikes shot out like bullets.

Early shift change. Win or lose in a drag race would hinge on this timing.

The next traffic light was green—the goal had been lengthened. As he'd thought, the difference in their engine displacement allowed his opponent to pull ahead.

Getting angry, just as he opened the throttle again...

(Augh!)

Some sort of brown obstacle suddenly appeared in front of him.

(Wha?!)

He turned the handle sharply and stepped on the break unthinkingly to avoid it. The bike lost its balance. Unfortunately, the tires then lost their traction in the puddle in front of him, and he was thrown off.

"!"

Flying off the bike...tumbling...

Takaya rolled on the asphalt. The GSX spun and slid on its windshield for several meters, hitting countless rocks along the way, before falling to a hapless stop right in the middle of the road.

"...oow—"

Half-raising his body, Takaya peeled off his helmet and flung it away, groaning.

"Fuck! What the hell was that?"

The obstacle in his path came rushing over to investigate the source of all the noise, its tail wagging. It was a midget Shiba puppy.

"Urg—"

The dog (who knows what's going on in its doggy brain?), gamboled about the groaning Takaya, lying on the road covered in dirt. There were

pieces of the GSX's windshield and broken mirrors scattered on the road

(This is the worst...)

He looked up at the sound of an engine; his opponent on the FZR had returned. He'd thought that she had come back to inquire whether he was okay or sympathize or something, but the FZR woman said in a high, beautiful voice:

"Bit weak on the evasion there, Greenie."

"Whaat?!"

Rage max.

"You asshole! You were the one who...!"

Vrooom!

The fierce rev of engines interrupted him, and the woman rode away without looking back.

"Wait, damn you!" Takaya coughed.

The bike disappeared into the blue horizon, leaving only white exhaust smoke behind.

"....aaaaaargh...."

Seated on the asphalt, Takaya gazed after it in blank half-dazed surprise. The puppy sat on his lap. And in front of him were the cruelly abused, scratched-up, black remnants of his beloved bike.

(Wha...wha...wha...)



Endurance limit exceeded

"What the hell was that—?!"

Indubitably, a sentiment anyone could identify with in such a situation.

Eventually...

He finally cleaned up the accident and arrived at school at the end of 2nd Period.

His wounds, luckily, were only abrasions. He judged that he didn't need medical attention, and just went straight to class.

But he was loudly accosted by Morino Saori just as he stepped into the classroom.

"Wh-what happened?! Those cuts! What've you been doing?!" she cried in her usual piercing voice, and dragged him off to the infirmary on the first floor of one of the school's southern buildings.

Saori kept up a flow of complaints as she rolled the bandages.

"Sheesh, you just had to go against school regulations and ride a motorcycle to school—and now look what happened."

"...Shut up."

Takaya was sitting at the teacher's desk, chin resting crookedly on his right arm while he stared at Saori administering to his other outstretched arm with exaggerated care.

"I'm pissed off too, so stop nagging."

"Well, it was your own fault. Stoplight racing? You should've just ignored a rude person like that."

"If I passed up on the challenge, I'd get laughed at."

"So that's it, huh?" Saori grumbled. "To laugh at or to be laughed at, you're always like that. So you're always on guard. Because you care too much about appearances."

"I don't care about appearances."

"Yes you do." Clapping Takaya on his bandaged arm, Saori said with self-important gusto, "If you don't change that twisted personality of yours, you'll definitely end up getting hurt in the future."

"You've been a big help."

"You're just lucky you've got a great role model right here. You should try and learn something."

"Role model? Who're you talking about?"

"That should be obvious!" she responded flatly. "Narita-kun, of course."

"..."

Saori continued irrepressibly, "And besides, this thing about the accident's going to get out in the school, isn't it? You reported it to the police, right?"

Takaya brushed the hair out of his eyes gloomily. "I wasn't going to, but unluckily for me a policeman happened to pass by. So thanks to that this thing was blown way out of proportion."

"So you told the police everything?"

"Oh, 'bout half and half. It wasn't like a serious accident or anything," he replied, waving his right arm. "Well, even if it's leaked out in the school, at most I'll get a warning or maybe a suspension, but they won't make me drop out or anything."

"I don't know, Ougi-kun, your record's pretty lousy."

"What did you say?"

"I'm worried about you."

Takaya sighed deeply. "...well, looks like it's going to take some serious dough to get the bike fixed."

Saori said in an unexpectedly cool voice, "Huh. Well, you bought it on a loan, didn't you? Why don't you just make your parents pay for it?"

"Silly. I paid for it on my own."

"Eh? Really?"

"Why would I ask for something like that from my parents?"

A quick sideways glance revealed a rather scary look on Takaya's face.

(Wha...?)

She suddenly felt uncomfortable.

(Come to think of it, he...)

"Augh, geez, now I'm pissed!" Takaya yelled roughly, stamping his feet, interrupting Saori's thoughts.

"I still have half the loan to pay off! It's no joke! That woman! I'm gonna make her pay! Dammit!"

"Ou-Ougi-kun..."

Saori quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, oh, right. Speaking of which, that—you know, um, that guy.

Nao...Nao...what was it? That friend of yours who was with you that last time. That really cool guy! Nao..."

"Naoe?"

"Yeah! Naoe-san. How is he? Have you seen him again?"

"Naah." Takaya looked towards the schoolyard. "He said that he'd come back soon, but there's been no news of him. Now it all feels like a dream..."

"That's true, isn't it..." Saori nodded. "It's pretty unbelievable now that you think about it... Skeletons walking around in the city, you summoning some strange Buddhist statue with strange powers..."

"I didn't summon a Buddhist statue."

"Did it really happen?"

Takaya's mouth snapped shut.

There'd been times when he himself had wondered if it'd been just a 'dream'.

During that encounter with Shingen, he had used the 'awakened' <<powers>> within himself by intuition alone, but they'd disappeared before he'd even noticed it. It was true that he'd been able to effortlessly move things without touching them then, but he had now lost that sensation as well.

He couldn't even remember how on earth he'd done it.

It'd been some kind of dream. Or perhaps some kind of illusion.

What had happened that day. Naoe. It was all very much like the memories of a dream that had ended.

But whenever he saw the scaffolding, used the temporary streets created for the reconstruction of the terminal building of Matsumoto Station, which had been destroyed in that battle, he had to admit that that night had really, without a doubt, happened.

The evidence for all of it being real was strong enough that he couldn't escape from it—not that he wanted to escape, but it was still disturbing, as if the things that had happened in his dreams had become reality when he'd awoken.

"So, so, so, Ougi-kun! What about Naoe-san? What happened to him?"

"..."

Apparently Saori didn't care at all about whether it was a dream or something else; she seemed to have become Naoe's fan.

"You...what about Yuzuru?"

"Huh? Wha, no way! Narita-kun is my favorite, so of course Naoe-san is the rival."

"...she's an Amazon," Takaya ruthlessly slandered Saori, his head in his arms.

"Hey, hey, let's get back to class. Biology's next."

"Saori. You know..."

"What? Ack, we only have five minutes left!"

Saori ran towards the exit, hurrying Takaya along. Takaya pressed a hand against his forehead and sighed.

(What a great start to the day...)

He left the infirmary with the beginnings of a headache throbbing in his temples.

"Ah!" They had returned to the entrance hall when Saori suddenly called out and waved her hand at a group of students coming towards them.

"Heeey! Chiaki-kuuuun!"

"?"

A tall male student wearing glasses walked towards them. He had a well-proportioned physique and a handsome face, and gave off an almost-imperceptible air of refined maturity.

Takaya didn't know him, but he seemed to be a friend of Saori's.

"Hey, Chiaki-kun, what'd you get?"

"Something to do during English. Biology is going to be in the classroom."

"Huh? There's no experiment today?"

A puzzled expression was on Takaya's face as he observed this student called 'Chiaki' during his exchange with Saori. Takaya could tell that he was in their same year from the color of the indoor shoes he wore, but he had never seen this student's face before.

"Speaking of which, Ougi."

"Huh?"

Suddenly 'Chiaki' called him by name, and Takaya's eyes narrowed at the familiarity. Apparently this student knew him somehow.

"The homeroom teacher, Matsuzawa, wanted to see you. He said to come to the staff room later."

"Ah. Right, thanks," Takaya said stiffly in reply, casting him a glance from beneath lowered brows. To be addressed so familiarly by name by someone he didn't know had sent a strange feeling through him.

"I'll see you later," Chiaki said, and ascended the stairs.

Saori waved for a little while at Chiaki's back and said earnestly, "Yup. Handsome as usual."

"What's with that guy? Friend of yours?"

Saori looked up at him, eyes widening.

"Wha... Ougi-kun?"

"What?"

"Oh no oh no. What did you say just now?"

"What? I just asked if he was your friend."

Saori's eyes were round as saucers.

"My friend'? Ougi-kun, don't joke like that with that deadpan expression on your face. I might think you're serious."

"Who's joking? I just wanted to know who he was."

"Oh. Oh no oh no oh no!"

Expression changing, Saori jumped on him and clung to his arm.

"Ou-Ougi-kun! Did you hit your head? Maybe something got scrambled?
Do

you know where you are? Can you say your name? What's one plus one?"

"Wh-wh-what the hell? What are you talking about?"

"You really don't know who Chiaki-kun is? You really can't remember that person who was just here?"

"How the hell would I know him? This is the first time I've ever seen him!"

"Ougi-kun!" Saori wailed. "He's in our class! He's been with us since our first year!"

"!"

This time it was Takaya's turn to glare.

"Classmate? Him? Don't make me laugh..."

"Chiaki Shuuhei! Chiaki—you remember him, right? You know who he is now?"

"Chiaki...Shuuhei?"

"You don't even remember his name?"

Remember what? This was the first time he'd heard it.

(Classmate? No way...)

Takaya searched his memory, sweating.

That face. That name. Was there someone like that in his class? A student called Chiaki Shuuhei? A classmate with that face...?

"That's not good. Wait, Ougi-kun, are you serious? You're not joking? You really don't know?"

"Stop shouting and be quiet!"

With Saori standing beside him, her face paling, he earnestly searched as deeply through his memories as he could, but all he came up with was a dazed blank.

He didn't remember.

He didn't know.

(No way...!)

"Ougi-kun, are you okay? Maybe you really should go to a hospital!"

"Dammit, I didn't hit my head!" Takaya said, but he was completely bewildered. He really thought that it was the first time he'd ever seen that student. He didn't have any memories at all of them being in the same class since their first year. No, he wasn't wrong. That student had not been there yesterday or before that.

"Saori, stop messing with me. That guy is absolutely not in our class."

"What are you talking about? Sheesh!" Saori shouted in disgust, flailing her arms. "You're the one who's lost it, Ougi-kun! It's Chiaki-kun! Come on, remember! Chiaki-kun!"

"I told you that I don't know anyone like that! What the hell is he? What the hell is this?"

"No way! No way no way! What should I do? You have amnesia! That's awful! That's not good! Ougi-kuun!"

Just then...

The speakers chimed, and a male teacher's voice resounded within the building.

"Year Two Class 3 Ougi Takaya. Second Year Ougi Takaya, please come to the principle's office on an urgent matter. Second Year Class 3 Ougi Takaya, please come to the principle's office."

Takaya and Saori exchanged glances.

Chapter 2: Misgivings

Narita Yuzuru was the one waiting for him an hour later when he came out of the principle's office.

"Takaya..."

"..."

He slammed the door behind him, veritably fuming, and kicked the wall for good measure.

"Those assholes! Goddammit!"

"Takaya!"

He looked completely out of patience, probably as a result of having been preached at for the entire hour. Even at the best of times he was never one to take criticism well; a feral light now glinted in his eyes.

Takaya had been summoned here for the infraction of riding a motorcycle to school.

The school had received a report of the accident from the police, and by this means learned that he was breaking school regulations. Takaya had endured a three-pronged attack from the principle, vice principle, and educational councilor. (The homeroom teacher had also been there, but had simply nodded in agreement to everything said by the others.)

In actuality, it was not without reason that the teachers had their eye

on Takaya, a troublemaker who was known for intractability and impertinence and a sometimes defiant, acrimonious attitude towards teachers. And so even before the confrontation there had been mutual hatred between them.

A few days earlier Takaya's rebelliousness had risen to such levels that it had driven the new homeroom teacher to skip school. He had taken the chance at this meeting, standing next to the other staff, to air out his complaints.

This incident had become the perfect excuse.

"Goddammit, that bunch of old goats! They went over every trivial little detail—I couldn't stand their babbling! They told me that they were 'being magnanimous and overlooking this incident'—can you believe that? If they're selling gratitude so that they can feel good about themselves, I'd rather take the punishment."

"Takaya, listen."

"Those bastards think they're so superior."

Takaya came to stand next to Yuzuru. He leaned his head back against the window, looking up at the ceiling and sighing deeply.

"I told them that my parents were bad at raising me, and there were problems with my upbringing, and that they should stop treating me like a kid and what not. They told me that I was responsible for my own damn personality, dammit."

"Did they really tell you that?"

"... Well." Takaya disgustedly brushed the hair out of his eyes. "They were caught up in the moment and really let loose. They said that a family's circumstances didn't matter at all, and even went into the whole 'that's why a one-parent household'...blah blah blah."

"..."

"What the hell does it have to do with them whether I have one parent or two?"

Yuzuru looked over at him anxiously.

"Takaya..."

"..."

Takaya glared steadily out the window, his expression more than usually grim. Yuzuru pulled himself together and said brightly, "Hey, Takaya."

"?"

Yuzuru turned and held out a gym uniform and shoes to Takaya.

"P.E.'s next—we have volleyball in the gym. You're not going to have time to change if you don't hurry."

"..."

Takaya looked at the uniform, then at Yuzuru. Yuzuru gazed back at him soothingly.

His expression changed just a little.

"Thanks."

They walked down the corridor together.

"By the way, Yuzuru."

"Hmm?"

"You haven't heard of a guy called Chiaki Shuuhei, have you?"

"Eh?"

Yuzuru looked at Takaya, bewildered.

"What about Chiaki?"

(He really does...)

He groaned unthinkingly.

"Ah—... Well... Um..." Takaya scratched his head. "What was... What was Chiaki's student number again?"

"Chiaki's student number? Uuum...let's see. What was it? Hmm, it's slipped my mind all of a sudden."

Yuzuru began to grope after the memory.

"I'm fifteen, so...Tomotoshi, Teduka, Tani...huh? It should be "Chi", right? That's after "Ta". Fourteen, thirteen...maybe twelve?

(Huh?)

Takaya thought it dubious.

Taniguchi, Teduka...

(That's strange.)

"It must be twelve, but why do you need to know?"

"Ah, it's nothing..." Takaya shook his head, still caught up in thought.

(Tanaka, Taniguchi, Teduka... After Taniguchi is Teduka. There's no one between them...)

Strange.

Wasn't it strange?

"Anyway, Takaya, we only have about two more minutes. Shouldn't we hurry?"

"Huh. Where's your uniform?"

"I have a checkup today." Yuzuru smiled weakly. "I haven't been feeling well recently, and for some reason I get tired really quickly. My club activities have been busy too, and I can't really stay home from school, so I've been careful and going for these checkups."

"Hmm..."

Now that Yuzuru had mentioned it, his face did look rather pale, and he seemed somehow listless.

(So he's feeling unwell...?)

"You haven't caught something again, have you? [Takeda Shingen](#) 's next-in-line...like [Kasuga no Tsubone](#) , maybe?"

"Don't say weird things like that."

It scared him that Yuzuru couldn't say for certain what was wrong with him.

"Are you really all right?"

"Yeah. And it's different this time. It really is just me feeling unwell."

"Yeah?"

Yuzuru smiled brightly. "Jeez. You're such a worrywort, Takaya. Come on, hurry up. Higashi's going to be here soon, and then you're going to be late again."

"Argh", Takaya groaned, and began to descend the stairs.

Though—in the end Takaya didn't make it in time to roll-call after all.

They were having a volleyball match in the gymnasium today. P.E. was separate for male and female students; four teams were formed, determined previously within the class.

Takaya's team acted as referees in the first match. Takaya entrusted that task to his teammates and took a seat along the wall. He eyes

darted here and there, chasing his classmates as if to confirm their identities.

(I know all of them, their names and their faces.)

Of the four teams, there was not a face he did not know.

With a single exception.

(Chiaki Shuuhei—)

He, too, was there. Participating in the match as if he were really a member of the class. But he was an outsider no matter how much Takaya strained his eyes. Everything else seemed to fade into the background as he focused his attention on that single person, but none of his surrounding classmates seemed to sense anything amiss around Chiaki. They chatted with him as if he just were another friend.

Takaya appeared to be the only one who thought anything was odd.

(Or is it really me who's got a loose wire somewhere?)

He asked a few people: "Is he really in our class?"

Everyone he asked gave him a uniformly blank look and replied,

"What, is that a new joke?"

Or:

"Did you have a fight with Chiaki or something?"

Or: "You should go home if you have a fever" while feeling Takaya's forehead.

And there were also those who undertook to give him advice.

In the end, the same reply: What the heck are you talking about?

"He's been with us since our first year!"

That's what everybody said.

But Takaya couldn't remember meeting him in their first year at all. No matter how much he thought about it, he came up with nothing.

If everyone else was right, then Takaya was the one who was off his rocker.

He immediately thought of a cause: the accident that morning. He didn't remember banging his head when he'd fallen, but it wasn't like he could recall each and every second of the accident.

But for argument's sake, even if his memories had been knocked out of him...

(I remember everything else; it's just that one person that I don't know at all—is that even possible?)

Only the memories concerning *him* had slipped clean out of his head.

Takaya's brows knitted.

(Why is it that I've only forgotten Chiaki Shuuhei?)

That was completely unnatural, wasn't it?

"Hey! Ougi! Did someone say you're amnesic or something?"

He let his head fall back. It was one of his classmates, Yazaki.

"Who're are you calling amnesic?"

"That's what everybody's saying. You had an accident this morning, right? There really are people who lose their memories because they hit their head. That's pretty cool, chump."

"You lookin' for a beating or something?"

"Hey, hey," Yazaki said, and took a seat next to Takaya. "So what's it feel like to be amnesic?"

"If you wanna know, go make yourself into one."

"We joke about it, but man, tough break. Getting forgotten by one of his best friend like that, that's the worst. Poor Chiaki."

Takaya jerked.

"Wh... Best friend? Who the hell are you talking about?!"

"You and Chiaki, of course."

"Stop shitting me. Why would I be friends with a guy like that?"

Yazaki let out a loud laugh. "Are you guys playing a big joke or something? You're pretty good."

"No I'm not! What the hell is that guy?!"

"All right all right, I got it." Yazaki waved away Takaya's protests.

"So let me tell you one thing, okay? Chiaki's always competing for first, second place in school. He's a goddamn prodigy, and we owe the Great God of Miracles Chiaki tons for helping us out. He's totally popular with the girls, and the teachers love him. So why would a guy like that hang out with someone like you?"

"I told you that wasn't it!"

"I feel really bad for him for being friends with a cold-hearted bastard like you. It's just a bit much, you know? Ougi! With a genius like that for a friend you should be a bit more sincere too, okay?"

"Hey, look—"

Smiling goofily, Yazaki clapped Takaya on the shoulder. "That's about enough for a joke, too. If you're gonna be this pig-headed, he's not gonna let you copy his homework tomorrow."

"Yazakiiii..."

Yazaki seemed convinced that Takaya's amnesia was a joke.

And also...

Apparently Chiaki was not only Takaya's classmate, he was Takaya's best friend too.

(Now my head's starting to hurt...)

Taniguchi came over.

"Hey, Ougi! We're playing! The match is on!"

"Hey, Taniguchi."

"You know, if you're gonna make all that noise, you should come help referee too. What's with those bandages? You're in, right? We're totally gonna win against Group 2 today, so you're playing no matter what."

"I'm injured, though."

"Whatever. Group 2's already gathering, so hurry up and get over here."

Their opponents, the members of Group 2, were already assembled on the court where the last match had just finished.

"Ugh," he muttered.

Chiaki was there.

"Woah, this is the match of destiny! Ougi, Chiaki's getting pissed, so be careful!"

"... Yazaki, dammit."

The whistle signaled the beginning of the match.

(But we're supposed to be good friends,) Takaya thought, getting into position to receive the serve. (If he were someone I wasn't particularly close to...but would I totally forget a good friend?)

He glared across the net at Chiaki, who must be 5'11" at least and had a beautifully-proportioned body which could well rival that of any model. The impression of coldness he gave, combined with his looks, was

quite cool for his age, and Takaya could understand why he was popular with the girls. But, as he'd thought, they wouldn't move within the same social circles.

Chiaki would stand out wherever he went...

(Could I really have forgotten him?)

Just then.

Chiaki suddenly stared right at him from across the net. Their eyes met. A jolt went through Takaya, and Chiaki—

Chiaki grinned at him.

(He...!)

"Ougi!"

He started at the sound of his name. The serve came flying straight at him.

"!"

He promptly received, but couldn't control the ball. It flew back to the other side without going to the setter.

(Urgh. Not good.)

Free ball. The other team passed the ball to the setter in a smooth, precise move, and the setter lofted the ball up high toward the left.

On the left was...Chiaki!

"Watch out!"

"Two blockers to the left!"

A running jump. Chiaki's upper body arched like a bow in mid-air, even higher than the block.

Too high!

Whack!

The spike shot the ball like a bullet to the ground at Takaya's feet.

"!"

The ball rebounded violently from the floor.

No one could save it.

For an instant the gym was completely silent.

Yuzuru, acting as referee, was dumbfounded. He came back to himself after a moment and blew the whistle, and everyone else finally stirred.

"Woooah...!"

Takaya roused at length to the voices of admiration around him. Chiaki was looking at him nonchalantly, as if nothing of note had occurred.

And he grinned again.

(What the hell is with that guy?!)

It had been a spike of extraordinary height and power—a magnificent hit that not many even among the members of the volleyball team could have matched.

No ordinary person, this!

The match resumed. The other team received the serve and set it up for the offensive—back to Chiaki.

"Here you go, Chiaki!"

"All right!"

(Here it comes!)

He glared at Chiaki's pose. Opening on the left. Another magnificent...

Spike!

"!"

It struck Takaya squarely on the shoulder. The ball rebounded hard, hit the rail of the net and slid off. Takaya, who had moved to receive the ball, stood flabbergasted. The heavy hit had smacked into his shoulder like lead, and it hurt.

Chiaki smirked at him again through the cheers. Takaya was taken aback.

(Is he targeting me?!)

Apparently he was. His spike had been aimed at Takaya on purpose.

(Asshole! What the hell is he trying to do?)

The match proceeded. The rotation swung back, and Chiaki and Takaya were about to come face-to-face again. Chiaki's attack had more than enough height on the block, so his spikes were cutting through the defense as if it didn't even exist. Chiaki gave him no quarter even after Takaya advanced to the left front defensive position.

Whack!

"!"

An unbelievably close hit. The spike from the six-foot-tall Chiaki struck Takaya smack-dab on the face.

"Ougi!"



Takaya hunched over on the floor, holding his face near his right eye. The other members of his team rushed up to him.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Ougi! Chiaki's serious, man. He must be totally pissed. That's why I told you not to go around saying weird things!"

"Scaaaaary!"

From the midst of his clamorous teammates Takaya looked at Chiaki out of his left eye.

Chiaki gazed back at him with a cold, thin smile. Pissed? No—rather, he was enjoying himself. He was actually amusing himself by tormenting Takaya with his spikes.

(Bastard!) Takaya seethed. (If he's gonna jerk me around...!)

"... Taniguchi."

"Huh?"

"When we get the ball next time, set it up for me. Open on the left."

"Open on... Okay, but you're not gonna...!"

Rage blazed brightly in Takaya's eyes.

He no longer saw anything but Chiaki.

"You idiot, Takaya! Don't take it seriously! You can't be thinking about going for Chiaki!"

"Shut up! Just hurry up and get into position."

"Ougiii... Lo-look, just calm down, okay?"

He didn't reply. His blood was boiling, and no one could hold him back now.

The whistle sounded.

Serve by the other team. It drew a slow arc across the net, and he knew that it would be accurately intercepted by Taniguchi, the setter.

Takaya yelled menacingly, "Over here! Taniguchi!"

"Augh, dammit! Fine, whatever!"

He lofted it high. Chiaki moved on the other side of the net. Takaya took a gigantic running leap.

"Ougi! Chiaki's jumping!"

(Wonderful!)

And then he struck with all his might.

Takaya's spike!

Chiaki's block!

Bang!

The spike was reflected magnificently by Chiaki's block, and hit the floor on his own side of the court.

"!"

Takaya's eyes widened in shock as he landed.

(He stopped it!)

He glared at Chiaki, whose counterattack hadn't even left him breathing hard. Chiaki was giving high-fives to his teammates with a relaxed smile.

(Bastard—!)

No one dared stand near Takaya, who was on the verge of exploding.

In the meantime, Chiaki stepped down from the rear guard position and stepped up to serve for side-out. His floater headed straight for Takaya. Since he'd known it was coming, he was well-prepared to receive it. He passed the ball to the setter cleanly.

"Taniguchi!"

"All right already, I got it!"

He lofted it. Takaya began to run towards it.

(This time...!)

There were two people blocking on the opposite team. They didn't matter. He jumped with all his strength.

"You bastard!"

An attack aimed at Chiaki!

But Chiaki showed no signs of being concerned. In the next instant, everyone gasped. What the...!

Chiaki never even attempted to receive Takaya's serve. He kicked it back carelessly.

"What...!?"

The ball leapt up and fell back into Takaya's team's court. It rolled on the floor. Everyone stared in stunned surprise.

"Wh...!"

Takaya's patience snapped.

"...What the hell are you doing...?!"

The people around him jumped.

"Uh...Uh-oh. Ougi! Ougi-kun! Calm down!

"It-it's just a joke, Ougi! Don't take it seriously! Don't take it—"

On the other side Chiaki was smiling his usual thin smile. Takaya saw it as a sneer.

"Bastard! You're gonna pay for mocking me! I'm gonna tear you apart!"

"Woooah, Ougi!"

Taniguchi and the others held Takaya back in a confused mass as he sprung.

"You idiot! Stop it, Ougi!"

"Let go of me! Let me just hit that guy once!"

"That's not a good idea, Ougi!"

"Chiaki, damn you, what the hell are you trying to do?!"

For a moment he gazed at Takaya shaking in the grip of his teammates before turning his back.

"Chiaki, you bastard!"

<<What, you mad?>>

Takaya suddenly stopped dead.

What?

That voice just now.

"Ougi, take a rest! You're injured, right?"

"You're out. Out!"

Takaya stopped struggling and reluctantly let Taniguchi and the others drag him out of the court. He remained quiet.

(Was that Chiaki's voice I heard just now?)

It felt as if it had resounded directly within his mind.

(Was I hearing things? But that voice just now—I'm sure I...)

The sound of the whistle echoed in the gym.

"That short temper of yours hasn't improved at all, huh?" Yuzuru said earnestly.

"..."

They were on the roof of the third-floor corridor. Yuzuru was seated against the fence. It was Fifth Period, Art. At Jouhoku High students had several choices: Fine Arts, Music, and Calligraphy. Takaya and Yuzuru had chosen Fine Arts, and today they were outside sketching.

Takaya held the sketchpad with a cross expression on his face.

"Not my fault. I just can't stomach stuff like that."

"Yeah, but you just got called into the principle's office. Don't make any more of a fuss, okay?"

"All right, all right already."

While scrawling on the white sheet of the sketchpad, Takaya added, "But I *am* pissed. Chiaki, that bastard, drives me over the edge. What the hell is up with that guy?"

"Speaking of which, Takaya, people are saying that you have amnesia? You really don't know Chiaki anymore?"

"Yeah, but...I don't know what's what anymore."

Takaya threw down the pencil and leaned back against the fence.

"I guess you can put it that way, or maybe I never did in the first place. People's memories are pretty unreliable things, huh?"

"I guess so."

"But," Takaya protested, leaning forward, "I just don't remember being friends with that guy at all. Were we really friends?"

"You were pretty close."

"Even more than us?"

"I don't know." Yuzuru smoothly sketched a tree in the courtyard on his sheet. "I don't know Chiaki that well, but your auras are similar."

(Similar?)

Me and Chiaki?

"On the one hand, he's an honors student, and the teachers adore him. On the other hand, for some strange reason I just feel that you guys get along."

"..."

"It's so strange that you'd forget Chiaki, of all things. But you should go to the hospital and get examined in any case, Takaya. You may not have any external injuries, but it'd be bad if there were something going on with your head."

"... Yeah." He nodded agreement, but it was rather absent-mindedly. He still had no memories of Chiaki at all, but Yuzuru wouldn't be mistaken.

(I guess I can't help thinking about this and that...)

He looked up at the clear sky.

The voices of several students approached them from the northern school building. They appeared to be first-year students returning to their classrooms from a Biology class that had ended early.

"Ah, Narita-senpai!"

A short boy in their midst saw Yuzuru and rushed over.

"Oh hi, Hatayama."

"Senpai, are you drawing? Your elective is Fine Arts, right?"

"Yeah. You're coming from Biology?"

"Yes. We had slides today."

The young man called Hatayama was a junior to Yuzuru in the school band. His short build gave him an air of delicacy, and he had chestnut-colored hair. (Yuzuru also had brown hair, but Hatayama's hair actually approached blond.)

Taking no notice of Takaya, who was looking at him curiously, Hatayama said to Yuzuru, "We had today off for band, right? Are you coming to practice at lunch tomorrow?"

"Probably, since I have to deliver some copies of the music tomorrow."

"Okay," Hatayama replied, and smiled. "Then see you tomorrow, Narita-senpai."

And as if he had just noticed Takaya, Hatayama bowed towards him apologetically and went chasing after his friends.

"Who's he?" Takaya asked Yuzuru.

"A first-year transfer student. You know his name's Hatayama, right? He just got into the band last week, but he's really good. Though his part's different..."

"Hmm..."

"He's half Japanese. He said that his mother is English."

"Oh, really...?"

True enough, his face didn't look entirely Japanese. Takaya was bad with foreign countries.

"He must be an ace at English, then. Maybe I should ask him to teach me."

"But your Japanese-English is perfect."

"Well, excuuuse me!"

"You should do your own homework once in a while."

The bell chimed.

Everything seemed peaceful here at Jouhoku High this early afternoon.

Chapter 3: Reminiscence

"Ooougi-kuuun!"

After class. Saori, at her club activities, espied Takaya and Yuzuru on their way home and came running after them in her tennis skirt.

They turned.

"Ougi-kun, Ougi-kun! Is your amnesia cured yet?"

"You think it's that easy to cure, you idiot?"

"Stop being so flippant! Everyone is worried about you! They're wondering if you're all right."

"More like they find it really interesting."

Yuzuru chuckled off to the side.

Students heading home and students going off to their club activities streamed out in a lively mix from [Jouhoku High](#) . "In any case, you..." Saori began lecturing, as they walked to the school gates.

"Are you listening to me, Ougi-kun!"

"I got it, all right? You have Club right now, don't you? You should hurry up and get back to it. ...?..."

His gaze paused on a strange person.

"What's wrong?"

An unfamiliar woman stood in front of the gates.

Sauvage-style long hair, white blouse, black jeans hugging long, slim legs; the students turned around to take a second look at this beauty as they went out the gates. She looked like a college student, and appeared to be waiting for someone.

Takaya started.

Next to her stood a blue replica FZR that he had seen somewhere before. She was holding a blue-lined full-face helmet.

(No freakin' way...)

The woman, noticing them, made a face that said quite plainly, "Oh!" And then she beamed and waved.

"Heeeello, Hot Stuff!"

"Wh-wh-wh! You—you're the nut from this morning!"

"Thanks for earlier!"

What the?!

The woman standing there was the one who'd ridden the FZR that morning. Yuzuru and Saori didn't recognize her, of course.

"Takaya? Who's that?"

"Her—it's her! The evil woman from this morning!"

"Well, that's pretty rude, isn't it!"

"Who's being rude here?! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Well!" The woman tossed her hair back indignantly. "I took time off from college to come here, so you should show a little gratitude at least, Takaya-kun."

"?"

She knows my name?

"And about this morning—I heard that you rode a motorcycle, so I wanted to see what you could do. But you still have a ways to go, huh? It's obvious that you'll fall if you cut the handles while braking that sharply, right? Didn't they teach you that at the riding school?"

"Wait, how do you know about me?"

The woman's eyes grew blank and round.

"... Oh, that's right. He did say that you've forgotten about us."

"What?"

"But we've been looking so hard for you. We never thought that you'd be a high school student in a place like this."

(Huh...?)

She looked over the bewildered Takaya critically, then nodded with approval.

"But that's good. I wasn't very happy when I learned that you were younger than me, but this time you're relatively to my taste." Then she gave Takaya a quick sideways glance and smiled charmingly. "How about a

'it's nice to see you again', Kage-tora?"

"!"

(Wh...!)

His breath caught as if he'd been struck.

She knew about him!

(Who the hell is this woman?!)

She glanced at the watch on her left wrist.

"Hmm. He's kinda late, isn't he? We agreed to meet here at three."

"Wait, what the hell...!"

"He should be here already... oh?"

Strangely enough, at that precise moment a car glided down the road and stopped right in front of them.

And it wasn't just any car. A Mercedes-Benz emblem glinted on the large, dark blue frame: a famed status symbol of the upper class...

(Waugh! A Benz!)

In front of the agog Takaya and the others the left driver's side door

opened, and a muscular man wearing dark sunglasses and a black suit stepped out.

(Woah! The mafia!)

Next to the petrified Takaya, the woman called out in a loud voice, "Yahoo! Naoe!"

"Huh?"

The black-suited man who had alighted from the Benz 560 took off his sunglasses and walked towards them. There was a smile on his unforgettable face.

"It's been a while, Takaya-san."

"..."

It was [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) .

Saori, behind Yuzuru, did a wild dance of joy. Takaya, exhausted beyond endurance, groaned wearily.

"What's wrong?"

"... So everything was at *your* instigation."

"I beg your pardon?"

"This woman—her! What the hell is with her?"

"Naoe, Naoe! How have you been?" The woman asked cheerfully.

"You got here early, Haruie."

"And you're looking sharper than ever!"

Noticing Yuzuru and Saori, he smiled. "Good afternoon, Yuzuru-san, young lady."

"Naoe-san, long time no see."

Saori only danced around, crying "He called me a young lady!"

Takaya pressed harder against his forehead.

"Anyway. Why don't you introduce me to that woman?"

"Well. 'That woman' is a pretty rude way to address someone who's your elder!"

"Stop that, Haruie."

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She placed one hand on her waist and puffed out her chest proudly.

"Hmmp. I don't need you to introduce me, Naoe. My name is Kadowaki Ayako. My original name was Kakizaki Haruie , the heir of one of Lord Uesugi Kenshin 's chief vassals, Kakizaki Kageie ."

Naoe added into Takaya's ear as he glared, "He is one of us, Kageitō-sama: one who received Lord Kenshin's decree to become a kanshousha

"Haruie, you said... but you're supposed to be a man... Ugh! You're not...!"

"Oh please! I am a genuine woman, one hundred percent!" Ayako pouted angrily. "Humph, you'll see! I've been a woman for more than two hundred years. I'm a lot more ladylike than most of the girls around here."

"???"

Naoe provided an explanation. "I've mentioned this before. We are tenants. Depending on the sex of the body we choose, we can become either man or woman."

"You're not serious..."

Because Yuzuru and Saori were still listening in, Naoe changed the subject

"In any case, are you free tonight? I was thinking that we should celebrate our reunion by going out for dinner."

"Celebrate... so are you treating?"

"Indeed."

He thought for a bit and answered, "Something like a class reunion, huh?"

Naoe smiled. "Then it's decided."

Ayako was frolicking around the Benz with Yuzuru and Saori like a child.

"Woah, cool! It's a real 560!"

"It really is roomy! Very nice!"

Takaya looked at Naoe with amazement. "You were driving a Cefiro last time, weren't you?"

"That was the third car. My family went out today, and they only left this one."

"You crooked monk. So what's the second car? I'm gonna hit you if you tell me that it's a Porsche."

"It's a Ferrari."

Takaya's fist shook in wrath. But just then Naoe suddenly turned toward the school buildings as if something from them had tugged at his attention.

"What?"

"..." Naoe scowled in the direction of the school for a moment without replying. He had sensed something strange.

(This school...) His eyes narrowed to glints. (Since when?)

Takaya asked doubtfully, "Naoe?"

"—Has something happened at this school?"

"Huh?"

Naoe glared silently at the buildings. Takaya also turned anxiously.

"Is something here?"

"No, it's nothing. Let's go," he replied, and turned on his heels. But he was still scowling toward the school over his shoulder with intense coldness.

(Has no one noticed it?)

This abnormality.

A sense of coldness enveloping [Jouhoku High](#) .

A stagnant...distinct 'malice'.

(This is...)

Night had fallen in [Matsumoto](#) , and Takaya was having a few drinks with Naoe and Ayako on the town.

"Cheers!" Ayako said brightly, clinking their glasses together. They were in a certain bar in the business district. Ayako had clamored to try [Matsumoto](#) 's raw horsemeat dish, so Takaya had brought them here,

a place he knew that advertised "delicious [basashi](#)".

Ayako drained her beer in large gulps and laughed uproariously. "Waaaah, this beer's so good!"

Amidst a crowd of businessmen on their way home from a day at the company and partying students, a strange trio sat at a table in one corner: a high school student, a college student, and a man in a black suit who at first glance might appear to be engaged in some sort of scary occupation. Takaya stared resentfully down at the orange juice in his cup, then turned his glare on Naoe, seated beside him.

"Why the hell am I the only one drinking juice?"

"You're still a minor, are you not?"

"A little wouldn't hurt."

"That would not be wise."

"What the hell? According to you, I'm already more than old enough, aren't I? So come on already!"

"It's your body that's in question here. Alcohol is not good for a body that is not yet fully mature."

"Why are you being so stubborn?!"

Ayako raised the beer bottle in one hand and shouted, "It doesn't matter. Heeey, Kagetora! Here, let's drink! We're gonna enjoy ourselves tonight! Yo, bro! More hot sake!"

"Wh-woah, are you all right over there?"

Ayako laughed loudly. "No worries. The night is young! Here, drink up!"

"Hey wait, stop filling it up like that!"

"Aaaah, this sake really does taste good when you're with great company."

Pushing away Ayako's mug, Takaya stared at the two with amazement.

"Are you guys planning to stay for a while or what?"

"We've already booked a hotel."

"And what are you here for this time?"

"Cause! Naoe said he'd treat me to **basashi** , so I came! You have to get i where they serve the real thing, right?"

"So you came here to eat raw horsemeat too?"

Naoe smiled with a mug of beer in his hand.

"I didn't get a chance last time, right?"

"Look, just what the hell are you doing? The station was destroyed, buildings were destroyed, the whole town was falling apart! It's been hard repairing all of the damage."

"So it seems. However, I do not believe I was that terribly meretricious."

"Aaaah, are you talking about that again? That's mean! I had to work so hard to deal with the Imagawa **onshou** , and there you were shooting off all those flashy lights! It's totally not fair that you left me out."

Oh, he thought.

"So then you were the ally with the power of exorcism that Naoe was waiting for..."

"Bingo! That's me!"

"... I'm glad you didn't come."

"What?! That's mean!"

Naoe picked at the [basashi](#) by himself as the two quarreled loudly.

"And? What happened to [Suruga](#) after that, Haruie?"

"[Imagawa](#) has submitted to [Oda](#) ."

"What?"

"History is repeating itself." Ayako rested her chin on her hands and sighed. "There are bindings of fate from [Okehazama](#) , you see. [Imagawa Yoshimoto](#) 's hatred toward [Oda](#) would seem particularly vicious, but he doesn't have enough <<power>> as an [onryou](#) to match [Oda](#) 's forces. He seems to have yielded to them."

"I see..."

Takaya interjected, "What happened to [Shingen](#) after that?"

"We're still searching for him. [Kousaka](#) should be with him, so they're probably looking for a place to perform another revival."

"Reeeeeeally... That *idiot* [Kousaka](#) . It totally sucks that he had to go and

resurrect [Takeda Shingen](#) . Now we have even more trouble on our hands.

"You mean...the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>?"

"Yeah! But now that we've found you, we've really got a boost of confidence."

Beside her, Naoe smiled with chopsticks in hand. "So you're saying that we should go and thank [Takeda Shingen](#) ?"

"Ugh, no way! Over my dead body!" She reached for the hot sake.

"Waaah! [Basashi](#) is so great with Japanese sake! Here, drink up, Kagetora! We're not

talking about these stupid things any more tonight. Let's party 'til dawn!"

"[Onee-san](#) , you're totally plastered. Woah! Don't pour sake into my cup!"

"Cheers to Kagetora-kun!"

"Is she all right...?"

"Don't just sit there looking dumb—come on, drink with me! Hey bro, let's have more over here!"

"Eek, you're kidding!"

Takaya, roped into Ayako's bright, unstoppable pace, was finally dragged haplessly along.

Under the neon of the bustling business district, the peculiar threesome's reunion shifted into full swing.

It was past ten that night when they left the bar. The three set out through the night wind toward the hotel.

"Hey, look! **Nee-san** ! Stop trying to move that quickly by yourself!"

The thoroughly sloshed Ayako raised her voice loudly in warbling song and strutted in front of the other two in perfectly wonderful humor.

"Is she all right?" Takaya muttered at Naoe haggardly, looking with utter amazement at Ayako's tottering steps. "She's totally gone. You could've tried holding her back a bit instead of just smiling and watching."

"I couldn't have stopped him if I'd tried. Haruie has always loved drinking."

"Whaaaat the hell!"

The glassy-eyed Ayako spun around in the middle of the pedestrian crossing. "You two, stop complaaaaining! Let's hit another place—!"

"Urgh!"

"What's up with you? Here, sing with me! Tra la la la la...!" Ayako staggered in her steps. "Huh?"

She lost her balance and sat down in place right in the middle of the road.

"Aaaugh, don't tell me." Pushing a hand against his forehead, Takaya rushed up to her. "Here, stand up. You can lean on my shoulder."

"...dum de dum..."

"You shouldn't drink so much that you can't even stand!"

Supported by Takaya, Ayako finally started walking again. Naoe followed in their steps, his gaze watchful and protective, his smile strangely bitter.

They finally reached Naoe and Ayako's lodgings, a hotel in front of the station.

"I'll get the key from the lobby, so please go ahead and wait for me in front of the room. Number 502," Naoe said, and headed for the lobby on the second floor, leaving Takaya with Ayako draped around his shoulders. On Takaya's back, the half-asleep Ayako was still going through her repertoire of songs.

"Don't fall asleep. We're almost there."

"...dum de dum dum dum"

Takaya half-carried Ayako into the elevator, and they finally made their way to the room. Takaya set Ayako down in front of the door, and Ayako slid down to the floor.

"...tra la la..."

"Sheesh, this was our first meeting. How shameless can you be?" Takaya

sighed, massaging his shoulder. "You can get away with it because you're a beauty, but if you're like that every time you go out drinking, you're gonna get taken advantage of by some weird guy."

"... Kagetoraaaa..."

Ayako, arms around her knees, was drifting off to sleep.

"What?"

"...don't..." Ayako was saying something to him in her sleep.

"What?"

"...Don't aban—..." She murmured, sitting like a little child against the door.
"Don't aban...don us...okay?"

"—" Takaya looked down at Ayako, a quiet expression suddenly settling onto his face. After a moment of silence, he answered in a subdued whisper, "... I won't abandon you."

Ayako turned toward him slightly. Her eyes closed as a slight smile floated to her lips.

Then she inhaled deeply and was fast asleep.

Takaya looked down at her silently, his eyes slightly downcast.

(Am I really...?)

Quiet music flowed down the carpeted corridor. There were no other signs of life on this floor.

Takaya stood motionless.

(I...)

The elevator arrived on their floor, and Naoe got out with the room key. He took a peep at Ayako slumped in front of the door and said to Takaya, "He fell asleep?"

"Ah... Yeah."

Takaya turned to see Naoe smiling gently.

"It can't be helped, I guess. Haruie's a good guy when he's not being such a lush, though."

Takaya looked down at Ayako.

"He must have been truly happy to have seen you again, too. That's why he was in such high spirits."

"Naoe..."

Naoe handed over the room key and took Ayako up in his arms. The air conditioner had been left on in the lighted, too-tidy room, making it somewhat chilly. Naoe set Ayako carefully on the front bed and looked down at her innocent sleeping face protectively. He murmured to Takaya, waiting to one side, "He must have endured much hardship as well."

"?"

"Haruie has a reason for choosing to perform [kanshou](#) on a female body."

"Reason?"

"Yes." Drawing a blanket over her, Naoe said, "Haruie is waiting. For a lover who died two hundred years ago. For that person to be reborn."

"..."

"I admire that." Naoe's eyes were slightly downcast. "Though one would have expected that intense passion, that fervent love, to be nothing but a moment's wild delusion...a passing dream which could not live for this long."

"... Naoe?"

Naoe said, turning, "I'm sorry to have kept you out so late today. I'll ask for a taxi for you at the front lobby..."

"Ah. ...Actually..." Takaya stopped, a little confused. "There are a few things I want to ask you about."

"?" This was the first time Takaya had approached him. Naoe looked at him, surprised. He thought for a moment and glanced at the bedside clock. "... The upstairs lounge should still be open. Will your family not be worried?"

"There's no one around to be worried about me."

"Oh?" Naoe returned, and retrieved the key. "Then shall we have a little after-the-party party?"

The lounge on the top floor of the hotel commanded an extensive view of Matsumoto's nightscape. A candle burned on each table, evoking a peaceful atmosphere within the dark lounge. There were few guests, perhaps due to the late hour on this workday evening.

The two took seats at the counter.

"Bourbon and a light cocktail?"

"Is that okay?"

"It's no big deal since you're with a guardian."

A middle-aged bartender picked up a shaker in response to their request. The orange flame of the candle flickered between them.

"Have you remembered anything more after that?"

Takaya shook his head. "Not at all. Actually, now even that strange power is gone."

He set both elbows on the counter.

"I've been thinking about it, and...I don't think I'm really Kagetora."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because then, shouldn't I have gotten my memories back along with the power? But now I don't have any of it."

Naoe smiled. "If you are not Kagetora, then how were you able to use that

power at all?"

"Well, but..." Takaya pursed his lips. "Maybe it's like you said...because I made myself think I was Kagetora... But then I started wondering if the real Kagetora would suddenly pop up..."

The bourbon and a clear blue cocktail were placed between them. Naoe picked up the glass of bourbon.

"You are Kagetora-sama."

"Why? What proof do you have?"

"What you did then is the proof. The presence of Bishamonten is not something you can summon just by thinking about it for a bit. Also, <<choubukuryoku >> is a unique <<power>> only those belonging to the Uesugi

can use. No one else has that power. In addition..." Naoe's gaze fell to the glass. "I have already decided. Ougi Takaya is Uesugi Kagetora . Even if in the future someone claiming to be the real Kagetora should appear, that person could never be Kagetora to me."

"...You've decided..."

"You've given me a chance," Naoe murmured, smiling slightly. "A chance to start everything over. You have erased the past from your own memories. To that which was beyond mending you bestowed this chance to start again from the beginning."

"..."

"I want to cling to that chance. ...a selfish thing to say, isn't it?"

Takaya's eyes widened. "Naoe."

"It's quite simple, if I think about it now." Naoe's slight smile turned into simple self-derision. "What happened between us is best forgotten."

An echo of Kousaka's voice echoed in his ear: *Who was it that kept driving him into the wall until he had nowhere left to turn? It was you, Naoe!*

The ice in the glass crumbled.

Takaya gazed silently at Naoe's profile, illuminated by candlelight. After a few moments he spoke.

"I've been reading up a bit on [Uesugi Kenshin](#) and Kagetora."

"I see. What are your thoughts?"

"...he was a pretty complicated character, wasn't he?"

[Uesugi Kagetora](#) .

Born during the [Sengoku](#) Period to [Sagami](#) 's warlord, [Houjou Ujiyasu](#) , his life had been a tempestuous one.

At that time in the [Kantou region](#) [Houjou Ujiyasu](#) , [Takeda Shingen](#) , and [Uesugi Kenshin](#) were engaged in a three-way struggle. All the mutual strife and mutual harmony of the hegemonies of the [Sengoku](#) stormed between these three powers.

As a child, Saburo Kagetora was sent as a hostage to [Takeda Shingen](#) at

the formation of the alliance between the three clans of Houjou,

Takeda, and Imagawa. Then, when that alliance was broken, he returned to become the adopted child of his great uncle [Houjou Genan](#) . However, in the twelfth year of the Eiroku era (1569), an alliance was formed between the Houjou and [Uesugi Kenshin](#) of [Echigo](#) ; in the following year he became a hostage again, this time to Kenshin in Echigo.

Kenshin gave him his own previous name, "Kagetora", and treated him like an adopted son instead of a hostage. After Kenshin's death, he was defeated in a battle of succession with [Uesugi Kagekatsu](#) , also an adopted son of Kenshin, and in the end took his own life. He was twenty-seven at the time of his death.

Trifled with by fate during the time of the three powers of the Kantou, his short life was squandered by the narrow path of a destiny appointed by the world of the [Sengoku](#) .

"The name of [Uesugi Kagetora](#) disappeared from history in the '[Otate no Ran](#) '. But another mission awaited you: the mission to exterminate the [onryou](#) , given to you by Lord Kenshin, God of War—to perform [kanshou](#) in order to send the [Sengoku onryou](#) remaining in this world to the other side. We have continued living to this time for that purpose."

Takaya scrutinized Naoe's expression. "But the [onryou](#) want to start another civil war?"

Naoe's fingers twitched subtly.

Yes, it was true.

They wanted to start the [Sengoku](#) era over again in this age.

<<Yami-Sengoku >>.

It was a battle taking place between onryou in the modern era, between those generals of the Sengoku who had failed within their own history to realize their ambitions.

They had awakened to begin the era of civil war a second time, now four hundred years later, with only their spiritual powers as their weapons.

This consolation battle was a second chance for the onryou seeking to erase the history of a war that should have ended four hundred years ago.

Takaya had only become aware of these events due to the resurrection of Takeda Shingen a short while ago. He had met Naoe then, and learned of his other identity as one of Naoe's comrades, Uesugi Kagetora .

That they had somehow managed to remove Shingen, who had taken possession of Yuzuru as his vessel, had been the mere prologue. Takaya had only touched upon the edges of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

So naturally he was quite far from knowing everything.

"What's actually happening in the <<Yami-Sengoku >>?" Takaya asked Naoe. "The onryou started the fight and what not, but you guys have been performing choubuku , right?"

"We do perform choubuku ,

but we do not target those spirits who are not active. Our duty is to remove spirits who cause harm to the living. We do not touch the shugorei ,

who are protective spirits, and any of the many spirits pouring out into the world who subside and go underground are no longer our targets."

"Unless they act up."

"Yes," Naoe nodded. "We are still unsure of the root cause of the rise of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>. We're speculating that it might have something to do with Oda Nobunaga ."

Takaya's eyes widened. "...you mean, that famous— He's an onryou too?"

"Much worse than that." Naoe linked his hands together upon the counter. "Nobunaga tried to deify himself while he was still alive. He claimed the title of "Demon King of the Sixth Realm " and after his death became a maleficent demon king who nurtured people's darkest beliefs. He was revived in the twenty-sixth year of the Showa Era (1951), around the end of the Pacific War, when Japan became a burning field."

"..."

"After his resurrection, Nobunaga and his followers took advantage of the chaos after the war to tempt people's hearts to evil. We moved to perform choubuku on Nobunaga. ...The battle lasted for more than ten years, a battle of

surpassing cruelty. In the end it became an all-out war in which we finally destroyed Nobunaga's cult, but the Uesugi too were annihilated. You and I lost our bodies, and could not complete choubuku on Nobunaga. However, we did manage to strike a hard enough blow to end the battle for the time being. That was about thirty years ago."

"And after that? Has Oda's side entered the <<Yami-Sengoku >> now as

well?"

"Yes. The [onryou](#) have been steadily entering into the dispute. Nothing so flashy as the

destruction caused by Shingen earlier, but Oda's influence has been spreading from the core force of the [onshou](#) under [Mori Ranmaru](#) . Their base is in the [Toukai](#) area, but at the present time Nobunaga himself does not appear to be active. Perhaps he is still charging his powers."

"And the rest?"

"The North-East is a bit noisy, but there's been a lull in the other areas. It could be that they are seeking direction after hearing of [Takeda Shingen](#) 's revival. He is a formidable opponent."

"Hmm..." Takaya sighed once. "But taking on all the [onryou](#) of Japan, that's a pretty tough job for you guys."

"Please don't make it sound like it's someone else's problem. Sooner or later you'll be drawn in, too."

"Are there only the two of you? Isn't there anyone else?"

"There are five [kanshousha](#) who received [Uesugi Kenshin](#) 's decree, including myself: [Uesugi Kagetora](#) , [Kakizaki Haruie](#) , [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) ...as well as [Irobe Katsunaga](#) and [Yasuda Nagahide](#) . Irobe-san had been a retainer of the clan since Lord Shingen's honored father, [Lord Tamekage](#) 's time, and was the only one of us five to die before Lord Kenshin. He performed [kanshou](#) just the year before last, so he is still an infant and for the present will not be able to join us."

"And the other?"

"Yasuda Nagahide ?"

Naoe touched the glass to his lips.

"He would have performed **kanshou** a few years earlier, but we haven't heard anything from him, and we do

not know his present whereabouts. He's quite a difficult fellow. He may have performed **kanshou** on someone not in embryo form, and wishes to stay out of the line of

battle. We don't know where he is or what he's doing now. Which is worrisome. We don't have enough forces on our side even under the best

of circumstances.

"He's strong?"

"He's second only to you in power. But he was originally one of **Lord Kagekatsu** 's people, and Haruie finds him disagreeable even now.

"That **nee-san** ? Why?"

"In the battle of inheritance, the '**Otate no Ran** ',

Haruie was the chief of those who supported Lord Kagekatsu—that is, who

supported you, and was killed by Lord Kagekatsu. He carries that resentment even now. That's why he has something of a grudge against those who were on Lord Kagekatsu's side."

"And you?"

"Would it make you happy if I had been on your side?"

Naoe smiled slightly at Takaya's glare and savored a sip of the bourbon.

"I'm sorry to say that I was on Lord Kagekatsu's side. Though I was killed over some trouble regarding the question of a reward, so I really can't boast about it."

Takaya stared at Naoe in mute astonishment. This was an utterly staggering conversation, if he really thought about it. He bit his tongue. The problem was, he still couldn't completely wrap his mind around Naoe's words.

Naoe perceived Takaya's hesitation.

"Do you...still not believe us?"

"... No. That's not really..." he said, then thought for a moment and continued, "You and I...that is...we both died fighting Oda Nobunaga thirty years ago, right? If we performed kanshou then, why aren't I the same age as you?"

"That's true... You probably performed kanshou on another body before this one. I think that's why our ages are different."

"..."

Takaya gazed fixedly down at his hand clenched hard upon his arm.

This act called kanshou ...

"It's a strange feeling, isn't it?"

"?"

"This 'kanshou'...possessing

someone, robbing them of their body, then driving out the soul who is the true owner and making it your own—that's what it is, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then this body really doesn't belong to me, does it?"

"... That is correct."

His grip tightened upon his sleeve.

"Then that means that there was originally someone else called Ougi Takaya here in this body?"

"..."

"If there was a me who wasn't me, then he would've been the real Ougi Takaya..."

"Takaya-san."

"Is it really all right to do this? Aren't I just doing the same thing to someone else that Shingen tried to do to Yuzuru? Is it really right for me to do that?"

Naoe regarded Takaya soberly. "But we cannot continue living if we do not, and we would not be able to carry out our mission."

"Don't you feel any guilt towards the original owners?"

"Does a carnivore feel guilt when it kills its prey? It is something

they cannot help in order to live. It is the same for us. It is something we cannot help."

"Cannot help? Is it really a question of helping or not helping? Is it something we're allowed to do just because we have a mission? We are uprooting their entire life. Haven't we done them wrong? Shouldn't we apologize to their family, their friends, for deceiving them?"

"... But the bodies we possess are in embryo form. They have no personalities, no ties to society as of yet."

"And so we're forgiven for it? That's not true, is it? The real Ougi Takaya should've been someone else. If nothing had happened, he would have been here where I'm standing. He would've known the people around

me. I'm a swindler—a fraud—aren't I? [Kanshou](#) makes us frauds and thieves, and even murderers! How can you guys do that with a clear conscience?"

"..." Naoe replied expressionlessly, "Don't you think we've thought about that?"

"!"

Silent once more, Naoe's gaze fell to the glass.

"Let us stop. If we pursue this, we will only continue to quarrel."

"..."

The ice clinked.

Takaya gazed at Naoe's cold profile.

The lonely music of the piano drifted in the lounge.

The gentle sound of the rotating shaker.

"Naoe..."

He looked at Takaya quietly. Takaya's downcast eyes were fixed upon the counter.

"Yes."

"I..." Takaya asked in an almost soundless murmur, "What...is it you want me to be?"

"..."

The piano played a melancholy sonata.

Naoe's eyes narrowed slightly. "You should...just be yourself, Takaya-san."

Some small piece of the candle-flame reflected in the glass burned in the street's neon lights.

The candle wavered within the streets.

Takaya closed his eyes.

"Will you be all right on your own?"

"Yeah."

Naoe saw Takaya off at the hotel entrance. Takaya turned up the collar of his denim jacket and looked up at the night sky.

"You're not going to give me a ride in your Benz, are you? 'sokay. I'll flag down a taxi at the station."

"I see."

"But how do you manage your temple, anyway? Do you extort alms from people or what?"

"My elder brother is a realtor."

"Don't they say that monks shouldn't deal in land?"

Naoe called out to stop Takaya once more: "Takaya-san."

"?"

"Has there been anything out of the ordinary happening around you?"

"Out of the ordinary?"

Takaya thought for a bit, and his eyebrows knitted. "What's strange is that everyone says that I'm nuts."

Naoe asked, a frightening expression on his face, "What?"

"Oh, speaking of which, I haven't gone to the hospital yet, so... I'm not really sure about this..."

And Takaya told Naoe about Chiaki and his own apparent amnesia.

Naoe listened to Takaya's general outline quietly.

"So it's like a reverse-zashikiwarashi ?"

"Everyone around me says that I must've forgotten, but I don't have any memories of him being one of my best friends at all. I'm not sure enough to tell that to everyone else, but no matter how hard I think about it, this is the first time I've laid eyes on him. I just don't know anymore. Dammit, gimme a break!"

"However...even if it seems unlikely, you might be the one who is right."

Takaya turned a startled face toward Naoe.

"It certainly is strange. I see. We will also make a trip to your school tomorrow."

"What do you mean, I might be right?"

"That you are the only one who can sense the true nature of things within that school. And I don't know if there's a connection or not, but..." Naoe returned his stare sharply. "There's a very strange air around that school."

"...!..."

A tepid wind blew across the deep-night city streets.

The seeds of disaster had already been planted.

Chapter 4: Omen

The next

morning. Yuzuru had arrived at school earlier than usual to take care of some tasks for his club. He greeted Takaya, who had gotten there just barely in time, in their classroom. "Good morning, Takaya! You're safe by the skin of your teeth!"

"Mornin'." Takaya's brows were drawn, and he looked rather wan. Yuzuru peered at him dubiously.

"What's the matter?"

"Just...a hangover. I should've known not to mix drinks."

"You all right? You drank too much, didn't you?"

"When I got home I got yelled at by Miya. Yesterday was not fun."

He sat down and sprawled across his desk. He didn't want to look weak, but for some reason he was really feeling it now. Takaya gave it some serious thought.

(... Maybe I've caught something.)

"Oh, Chiaki, good morning!"

"Chiaki?"

Takaya raised his head in reaction to that name and suddenly whacked his head against something hard.

"Ow! Who the hell..."

"You shouldn't drink like that when you're underage!"

"Hmph...!"

He looked up sharply to see Chiaki Shuuhei's handsome, bespectacled face.

"Good morning, Ougi-kun."

"Damn you... How dare you so casually..."

"So has your amnesia been cured yet?"

Glaring at Chiaki sitting in the seat in front of him, he replied sullenly, "For your information, I don't remember a damned thing."

"Hmmm...I seeee..." Chiaki grinned. "You must really resent me or something if you forget your peerless best buddy like this, huh?"

"Why would I resent you if I've never met you before?"

"Eh, whatever. Anyway, you got assigned Fundamental Analysis for Second Period."

"Ugh!" Takaya exclaimed. "When'd that happen?"

"Since you weren't there for First Period yesterday."

"[Yoshikawa](#) , you bastard! Stop assigning me work when I'm not here...!"

So this was the truant teacher's retaliation. Chiaki chuckled too familiarly

and rested his chin on his hands on the desk.

"Wanna see my notes?"

"No thanks."

"Stop being so high and mighty. The one you got is an applications problem, number three. It's super-convoluted—you'd never be able to get it."

Takaya glared at Chiaki, annoyed. This face with its air of maturity, fringed with soft hair, framed with eye glasses that lent him an intellectual look—and indeed, he seemed to have the brains to match, but—

(I totally do not know this guy.)

"I dunno what you want, but stop bothering me with every little thing. Just looking at your mug completely pisses me off."

"Woah. *Completely*...huh?" Smiling thinly, Chiaki added, "... Have you really forgotten me?"

"?"

Takaya gazed back at Chiaki, sensing some strange hidden meaning in his tone. Chiaki only looked at him, doubtful eyes narrowed behind his glasses. Takaya asked without thinking, "Just what the hell are you?"

"Is that something you say to a friend?" Chiaki gave a low laugh. "At least, we've kept each other company for quite a while."

"Quit joking! Quite a while? Like I remember any—" Takaya started to say, and stopped. He didn't remember anything like that? No...

(No, that's not...quite it.)

A strange sort of feeling brushed against his mind. It was not a sense of having been friends—no, that wasn't quite it. Rather, it was the feeling that they had been together. It was not a clear memory, nothing concrete, but he felt like they had been together from a very long time before. It was...

(What is this?)

"Anyway, have you heard, Ougi?"

"? Heard what?"

"That they appeared again in the north school building."

"Appeared? What did?"

Chiaki dangled his hands in front of him and replied, "You mean you haven't? They say that ghosts caused a big uproar over there."

"Ghosts? So, what'd they do?"

"What, you don't know?"

Takaya's reaction was probably a killjoy for Chiaki, who threw up his hands and leaned back in place against the wall.

"It was yesterday after class, around 6:30. Looks like there was this

big commotion because ghosts appeared in the north school building. They were violent here and there, too. It also happened four, five days ago. People are making a huge fuss about it right now."

Takaya leaned forward. "Were there really ghosts?"

"Geez. Everybody's been talking about it. There were people there from this class, too. People who saw it."

Now that he thought about it...

He actually did remember the girls clamoring about something like that two, three days ago. He'd thought it was just the usual thing, and hadn't paid any attention to it. Some of the students who did club activities seemed to have gained some fame because of it.

"There's a very strange air around that school."

Naoe's words came to mind. And now multiple ghost sightings had occurred in the school.

(Is that what he meant?)

"Well, a thickheaded guy like you probably wouldn't've noticed even if it'd hit you on the back of the head." Chiaki teased in a light, sarcastic tone with a sidelong glance at Takaya. "Anyway, why don't you give the ghosts some thought too? Since you probably have some time to spare in that empty head of yours?"

"Bastard..."

"Oops, there's the bell. Seeya," Chiaki said, and walked to the rear.

He exchanged friendly greetings with Yuzuru on the way and sat down in a seat in the back row. A seat which had certainly not existed the day before yesterday.

(Just what the hell is that bastard?)

A suspicious character, without a doubt. If Takaya's unease around him was justified, then just what was this person who called himself Chiaki?

("Zashikiwarashi"?)

Could he be called a phantom?

(Why is this happening?)

He had no idea at all.

And in any case, why was he the only one who could see through the pretense? Was it really because...

(Because I'm Kagetora?)

Though he didn't know whether there was any connection. But if he thought about it another way, he did have the feeling that there had been a time in which he'd known Chiaki. Well, he'd been seeing a lot of strange things since he'd met Naoe, but what was the explanation for this?

(I don't know!)

"Ougi. Is Ougi absent?"

"Ack...! No, I'm here," he heard himself answering the roll-call. The teacher—middle-aged, with a receding hairline—had already come into the room and was standing on the platform.

He carried on down the attendance sheet disinterestedly: "Let's see, Katou... Kogita..."

He continued reading the names intently in a monotone voice, giving no indication whether he'd heard any of the responses. Takaya began to lay his textbooks out on the desk with a feeling of listlessness. First period was Classical Literature.

(Well, but it's not like I'll get slapped any worse...)

That was just fine; if he thought about it a bit more, Doronuma was the type who waited. He deliberately saw nothing but defiant intent.

"Tanaka. Taniguchi..."

(So is it a zashikiwarashi this time or what...?)

"Teduka."

Surprised, Takaya's hand paused in mid-air with his notes.

His eyes lifted. Taniguchi's 'ta', Teduka's 'te'...

Chiaki.

(Chiaki's name wasn't there...)

The teacher continued unconcernedly. Takaya turned to look at Chiaki, who was sitting composedly with his arms folded, doing nothing to call attention to himself. None of the other students had noticed that Chiaki's name had been skipped.

Takaya gazed at Chiaki's expressionless face from across the room for a moment.

He's the real thing, he thought.

(I guess that's decisive enough...)

Takaya's face was unreadable as he looked at the table for the volleyball teams in his hand. The names of all members of the class were laid out on the team roster. Only Chiaki's name was missing.

Takaya had come to the P.E. teachers' office after Fourth Period. No attendance-type rosters had Chiaki's name listed. (And of course Chiaki's name was never called during attendance. None of the other students noticed this.) For verification, he had come to take a look at the volleyball team charts that had been drawn up just around two weeks ago.

He truly was not there.

(Chiaki really didn't exist until yesterday.)

But sometime yesterday, when he'd been late, Chiaki had insinuated himself into his class. And the other students sensed nothing out of place because they'd somehow had their memories altered or something?

(Actually, I've read about something like that.)

Something called mass hypnotism. A person one hadn't known just a moment ago could in the next moment become an old friend with a suggestion. He'd heard that it was possible...

But if his classmates had been hypnotized en-mass, what was Chiaki's intention in doing it? And if he wanted to give everyone that suggestion, then why couldn't he have given Takaya the suggestion as well, even though he'd come late?

(Or did he try to hypnotize me, and I wasn't affected?)

But if it was true Chiaki hadn't been there until yesterday, then what was that feeling that he'd had earlier? Had it been because of a suggestion?

In any case, this character called Chiaki Shuuhei—

(Who is he?)

The door opened behind him, and a familiar voice asked, "Oh, Ougi-kun. What are you doing here?"

He turned. Saori and her friends from her club had come in together. Takaya grimaced, as if to say "Here comes the loudmouth."

"Nothing important."

"What? You're still suspicious of Chiaki-kun, aren't you? Have you gone to the hospital yet?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I have club stuff. Where's Kawazoe-sensei?"

"Kawazoe went out earlier."

"Whaaat?" she said, exchanging looks with her friends. Then she seemed to suddenly remember something. "Oh yeah, Ougi-kun, have you heard anything about the ghosts that keep appearing?"

"Huh?" Takaya blinked, and his eyes widened. Of course. Saori had club activities, so she would know about it.

"There were people in our club who saw them too. I didn't actually see them myself, but I've heard about stuff like a desk rattling and collapsing in an empty room, or a faucet turning on by itself, or a florescent light in the corridor just suddenly going out. Oh, and Nakko saw it too!"

And Saori turned to look at her friend, who seemed more afraid of Takaya than of any ghosts. She nodded vigorously.

"What exactly did you see?"

"Ah...um, in the locker room."

"What?" Takaya asked in a low tone, which nevertheless still seemed to intimidate the female student.

She answered awkwardly in a small voice, "Midway through Club I went back to the locker room for something I'd forgotten. ...Somehow, there was this strange shadow... When I cried out, thinking it was a thief, that person...turned towards me...and..."

"And?"

"It was a bloodstained old man."

Takaya drew a startled breath.

"Then—..."

"And then he disappeared just like that, right?"

"...Yeah..."

Brows drawn, Takaya growled, "I never wanna meet a guy like that."

"But there aren't just male ghosts. In all the stories, there are woman ghosts and child ghosts and ghosts that look just like the common people."

"The common people? How's that?"

"I dunno. But in *Mito Koumon* they take the shape of common people..."

"Like I'd know anything about that."

"I have a bad feeling, Ougi-kun. Can't you do something about it?"

"Do something? Like what?"

"You know..." She clutched at him. "Do that extermination thing like you did the other day. The power that you used on those skeleton ghosts. That weird 'bai' thing. You can do it, right?"

"Look..."

"Nobody believed me when I told them about it. It's true, though. It's true that you did it..."

And Saori looked at her friends pleadingly, but they only stared back at her with consternation. Takaya gained control of his expression and gave a heart-felt groan. ...Actually, it'd be strange if they did believe her.

"Naoe-san came too, didn't he? So do it, okay, please? And then everyone will believe me, too..."

"How the heck could I do something like that?"

"Ooooooh, Ougi-kuuuun!" Saori wailed miserably, just as the door opened and the members of the soccer club trooped in. One of them was their classmate, Yazaki.

Noticing them, Yazaki called out, "Oh, Ougi. So you were here."

"You wanna make something of it?"

"No, I just haven't seen you since the end of classes. Um, I wanted to let you know that Yuzuru's collapsed, and they've carried him to the

infirmary."

"What?!"

The loud shout had come from Saori. "What did you say?!" Her expression changing, Saori gripped Yazaki by the nape of his neck. "Narita-kun! Narita-kun! What's happened to him?!"

"Ow ow ow! It looks like anemia. They say that Chiaki brought him to the infirmary."

(Chiaki...?)

Before Takaya had a chance to react Saori had already flown like a shot out the door.

"Narita-kuuuuun! I'm coming noooooow!"

"..."

Takaya gazed after Saori, whose only remaining trace was the echo of her war-cry, and then exchanged weary looks with the others.

"I'm fine, I just felt kinda light-headed. Saying that I collapsed was a bit over the top," Yuzuru said from the bed, and smiled. Saori, who had galloped to the infirmary, and Takaya, who had followed her, gazed at him worriedly. Speaking of which—Yuzuru had been feeling poorly since two, three days ago. And now, even while he was claiming to be

fine, Yuzuru's face was still white as paper.

"That's why I told you not to overdo things. This is enough for today; you're going home. Right?"

"Yeah. The teachers told me that, too. Chiaki's getting my bag for me right now."

Takaya crossed his arms and sighed, then took the opportunity to glare at the two people standing next to him. "Well? What're you guys doing here?"

"We saw you at the entrance hall."

It was Naoe and Ayako, who'd had the nerve to follow him here.

"That's not it! I asked what you were doing here at my school!"

"I said that we would stop by today," Naoe replied curtly, and peered at Yuzuru's face. "Are you all right, Yuzuru-san?"

"Ahahah... Somehow you always catch me at my worst, Naoe-san," Yuzuru laughed weakly.

Takaya said to Naoe in a hard voice, "Anyhow, you drove here, didn't you? You'll give Yuzuru a ride home in that Benz of yours, right?"

"I will. But it was nice timing, wasn't it? If you are able to do some preparation, please accompany him to the entrance hall. I will bring the car."

"Wait a minute, you're going to drive to the entrance hall?"

"That will be all right, will it not?"

"You'll totally stand out!"

"Will that be a problem?"

These two would stand out even at the best of times. Takaya had wanted as much as possible to keep people from knowing that he had anything to do with them, but he couldn't really think up an excuse to stop Naoe. In the end he had to face defeat and stay silent.

"Sure, fine, do whatever you want."

Naoe and Ayako left the infirmary first.

"What is with that attitude? And you're doing him a favor, too! Was Kagetora that overbearing too?"

"Show some respect and use 'sama'."

"Wasn't Kagetora much more of a calm, rational, and sensible guy?"

"... Perhaps." Naoe said in a low, quiet voice, "Though in his previous life (the life before he performed [kanshou](#)), he was certainly like this. This Kagetora-sama feels much like that one."

"? What do you mean?"

"He has returned to his first form." Naoe looked over his shoulder at the infirmary. "He has sealed the whole of his personality as the [Uesugi Kagetora](#) who has lived until this point. It probably isn't much of an exaggeration to say that he has purified his own external personality. [Haruie](#) . This Kagetora-sama is not [Uesugi Kagetora](#) , but an ordinary high

school student called Ougi Takaya. You must not seek Uesugi Kagetora 's personality in his."

"... But..."

"In any case," Naoe turned, cutting Ayako off. "The young man we met today. What have you sensed from him?"

Ayako frowned in concentration. "—If I'm not mistaken, he is no ordinary person, but..."

"You don't know either?"

"Mm...mm."

In actuality, it'd been one of the reasons he had come to Matsumoto on this visit. Within their group, Ayako—Kakizaki Haruie —particularly excelled at the spiritual sensing called reisa . In order to unravel the riddle that Kousaka Danjou Masanobu had left him during the previous Takeda Shingen case, he had brought her here to see Narita Yuzuru for herself so that she could do an assessment in person.

"That 'Narita Yuzuru's existence is a threat to the Roku Dou Sekai ,' right? Those are not words to be spoken lightly. I wonder what he meant by them?"

"...I see. So even your powers are not enough...?"

Ayako pouted. "Anyway, it's hardly surprising that only someone with such uncommonly strong reisa-nouryoku as Kousaka would know. That guy probably knows the previous lives of everyone in the world."

"That's an exaggeration, don't you think?"

"...Well, I suppose not all." Ayako's tone took on a trace of seriousness.

"But with his level of [reisa-nouryoku](#) ,

it's not impossible that Kousaka would be able to discern a soul's

<<nucleus>>. At least, he would probably be able to discern

the pattern of the soul-nucleus of a person he had known previously

even after purification and rebirth. Scary thought, isn't it?"

Naoe narrowed grave, intense eyes. "So you're saying that 'Narita Yuzuru' is the transfigured rebirth of someone Kousaka knew?"

"I don't know, but I'm saying that the possibility exists."

Naoe knuckled his chin thoughtfully.

At the time of a person's rebirth, their soul underwent purification so

that their personality and memories were removed, and the consciousness

called 'self' was made consistent. The 'self', the portion of the soul

that formed its <<nucleus>>, alone remained eternally

unchanged even through purification.

Ayako's [reisa-nouryoku](#) could only recognize spirits who had not undergone purification, but it

was said that there were individuals among those with higher spiritual sensing abilities for whom it was possible to recognize this

<<soul-nucleus>>. In any case, though it was not possible

to obtain information about a person's past lives from their

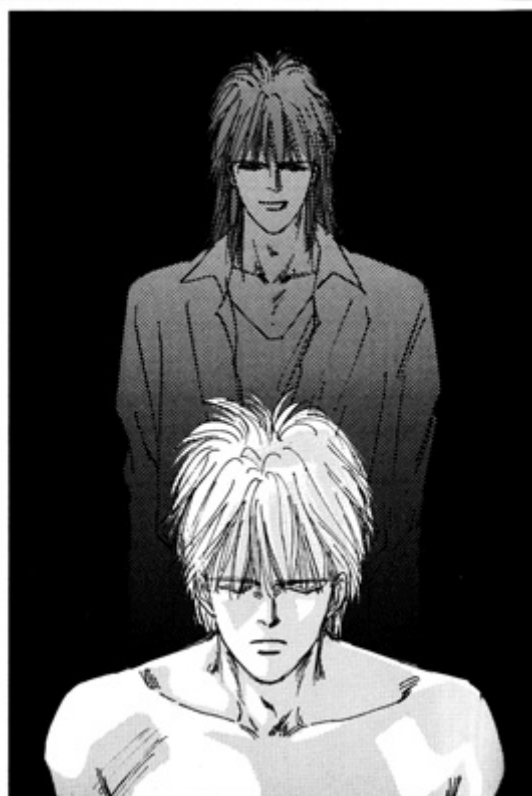
<<soul-nucleus>>, the pattern of a

<<soul-nucleus>> could be used as a comparison for a person

one knew in the past.

It could be said that though **Kousaka Danjou** , too, was a **kanshousha** , his **reisa-nouryoku** was on a completely different level. This was probably why he was able to see through to Yuzuru's true self.

(Or could it even be something else entirely...?)



Ayako interrupted Naoe's thoughts. "Besides that, Naoe..."

"?"

"What's wrong with this school? This accumulation of spiritual energy is not ordinary. It'd probably make a sensitive kid feel like running away."

"Yeah." Naoe's voice fell as he replied, "It wasn't like this when I came here before. It seems that something happened after."

"It's because of this aura that that Yuzuru kid's collapsed. Poor thing. If I had to stay here for a day, my body would probably go strange on me, too."

"He's very sensitive, isn't he? But it is a very malevolent aura. What in the world...?"

Suddenly Naoe turned, and Ayako looked in the same direction. They gazed at the person walking towards them.

It was Chiaki Shuuhei.

The two parties stared at each other for a long moment.

"..."

Without a word, Chiaki looked away from them first and slipped into the infirmary. The expressions on Naoe and Ayako's faces were equally cold as they gaze after him.

"...Naoe."

"Yes."

Naoe's face was impregnable.

"Yuzuru, I've said this before, but there really is something weird going on with you and your body. There must be a connection with this

ghost brouhaha somewhere. There just has to be."

Takaya's suspicions apparently also leaned in that direction. Chiaki had returned with Yuzuru's bag, and Yuzuru began to prepare to leave with willing haste.

"That again? Maybe. But I also think that it could just be that I'm tired."

"Stop being so obtuse. Jeez, this strong spiritual sensitivity thing is so much trouble."

Chiaki interjected from one side, "Easy for you to say, when you walk around wearing dullness like a uniform."

"What the hell? So are you saying that you have strong spiritual sensitivity too?"

"..."

Suddenly looking innocent, Chiaki crossed out the infirmary's registered name with a ballpoint pen. Saori, who'd been acting like a grown up until that point, shouted, "Oooougi-kun!"

"Woah, geez, you surprised me."

Saori grabbed Takaya's collar. "Wait wait wait! Who is that woman? That woman with Naoe, who is she?!"

"She was here yesterday, too..."

"Lover? Friend? I'm gonna go crazy if you say wife!"

"Look..."

"His cousin, right?" Yuzuru answered unexpectedly. Takaya goggled at him.

"Huh?"

"She gives me that feeling. If Takaya and Naoe-san are cousins, then she is too, right? Your auras feel alike."

"Yuzuru..."

"Hmm. Speaking of which..."

Yuzuru turned to Chiaki, who was standing in front of the desk.

"Chiaki. Something about you...is like Naoe-san, too."

"..."

Chiaki's eyes raised for a moment to gaze at Yuzuru, before falling back to his notes.

"Must be your imagination."

Takaya looked dubious.

"Anyway, we should go and wait for them, right? Let's hurry?"

"Yeah, okay. Oh, Takaya," Yuzuru said, and extended several sheets of paper he extracted from his bag. It was the score for a wind instrument. "Can you deliver this to Hatayama in First Year, Group Five? I was planning to give it to him at noon practice today, so I didn't go earlier. I can take it to him now, but I don't want to keep Naoe-san waiting."

"Sure, it's fine. Hatayama's the one I met yesterday? That half-Japanese guy—...?"

"Yeah." Yuzuru smiled a bit. "Can you get it to him by the end of the day?"

Just as Takaya reached out to take the score from Yuzuru—

The lone flower vase behind them fell.

"!"

They turned reflexively at the same time. The flower from the broken vase lay cruelly mangled upon the floor. For a moment the infirmary room was still as death.

"Ah...oh no. What was that just now?" Saori muttered, just as the large broom behind them crashed to the floor. A sudden rush of cold air enveloped them.

"...Takaya..." Yuzuru said hoarsely. "Something...is here."

"Huh?"

Crack! The light bulb in the mobile medical-use light stand next to Takaya shattered. The pens on the table stood on their ends before flying into the air. The framed oil painting hanging on the wall screeched as it tilted, and the shelves all simultaneously fell over.

Takaya concentrated on the surrounding aura cautiously. Saori was hiding behind his back. Yuzuru, still as a statue, was hardly

breathing, and Chiaki stood rigid guard as well.

(Something's here...?)

He reached a hand behind him to grab a book to throw.

(A spirit?)

"Takaya."

He turned at Yuzuru's sharp voice. In a corner of the room.

A woman stood there in a white kimono, her hair matted and disheveled.

"Aaaaah!" Saori started screaming bloody murder. "Ougi-kun, a ghost! It's a ghost! Get her! Do that 'bai' thing! Come on!"

"Um... Yeah but...I forgot how..."

"No way..."

The woman's pale face was framed by a mess of black hair that spilled down her kimono. Blood flowed from the area around her neck, and her chin was half-mutilated. She gazed over at them out of dark, bitter-seeming eyes. Takaya tensed and clutched his book more firmly.

"Ougi," Chiaki said, his voice full of command. "Don't move. I don't think she will do any harm."

"Huh...?"

Takaya's gaze turned to Chiaki, and he put the book down. Saori, behind him, was earnestly chanting a Buddhist prayer. Takaya turned around to

face the female ghost once more.

"What is it you want to say?"

The ghost looked at them out of lifeless eyes.

"If there's something you want to say, then try to say it, lady."

Though her mouth opened partly, the ghost did not respond. He asked carefully, with even more intensity, "What do you want to say?"

Without replying the ghost faded away with a soft rustling sound from her feet upward. Almost simultaneously the chatter of voices from the school returned, and the cold air disappeared.

"What...what was thaaaaat! That thing just now!"

"Takaya."

"...yeah."

At Yuzuru's side, Takaya gazed at the place where the ghost had stood.

Suddenly his eyes swung to Chiaki. Chiaki was also glaring at that spot with a terrible expression on his face.

Takaya slowly folded his arms.

Chapter 5: The Past

During the break after Fifth Period, Takaya went over to the First Year Group 5 classroom with the music Yuzuru had left with him before he'd gone home. He conscripted a student near the door to fetch Hatayama Satoshi.

"Yes?"

Hatayama came over, a blank look on his face. The light chestnut of his eyes appeared quite Japanese, and he had pale skin and hair soft as silk thread. There was delicacy still in his body, making him look very much the junior high student.

Takaya thrust the clear folder containing the music at him.

"Yuzuru wanted me to give this to you. So there you go."

"Eh? Yuzuru?—you mean, Narita-senpai? He didn't come for the noon practice, though. Did something happen to him?"

"He wasn't feeling well, so he left early. I dunno if he's coming tomorrow either."

"... I see..."

Hatayama looked down at the music with quiet disappointment. The other students, for some reason, were staring at them and whispering to each other. Ougi Takaya appeared to be a well-known personality within the

school. The junior high students were in the same school, of course, and most of them recognized the Second Year with the rather scary face who was always being called to the principle's office. If it was strange that Takaya (who should have no connection to those underclassmen who went straight home after class) was in a first-year classroom, then indeed the fact that he had picked out the honors transfer student seemed to simply invite misunderstanding.

Takaya shot them a glare.

"Ougi-senpai," Hatayama called his attention back.

"? What? You know my name?"

"Yes. I've heard about you from Narita-senpai," Hatayama replied with a smile, not timidly at all. "Everyone says that you're a 'scary person', but that's not really true, is it? Is it because you get into fights? Or do you do things like hit the teachers or break the windows or something?"

"...What is it you want to say?"

"Oh, that I think you must be a strong person."

Takaya looked down at Hatayama, eyes narrowed. There didn't seem to be any malice behind this gritty young man's words.

(He's probably just stupid...)

"I moved last week, so I live pretty close to Narita-senpai now. Would you like to go visit him together later?"

"..."

It felt rather like something of a recurring pattern.

"Sorry, but I've got stuff to take care of."

"Ah, I see. That's too bad," Hatayama pouted. "And here I thought I'd finally get to ask you about the ghost skeletons, too."

Takaya started.

"What did you say?"

"Ah, well..." Hatayama waved a hand in front of his chest lightly. "It's just that I heard that you exorcised those ghosts..."

"Yuzuru told you that?"

"Yes."

He somehow doubted that Yuzuru would tell anyone about that, but

Hatayama continued, "You've heard about it too, haven't you?—that there've been a lot of ghosts appearing here in the school recently."

Takaya scratched his head, not adding that he had met one earlier that same day.

"Everyone's pretty uncomfortable right now, so if what Narita-senpai said is true, then it would be really great if you could exorcise these ghosts..."

"Do you really believe something like that?"

"I believe it." For one moment Hatayama's lips seemed to twist suspiciously. "It's certainly not impossible."

"..."

What was up with this guy?

Something like a warning flashed through Takaya's chest, but before the suspicions could take form, Hatayama smiled lightly.

"The band has a concert next week. I'll be playing in it too, so please come to see us."

"Ah...yeah..."

Takaya, wrapped up in Hatayama's hurricane pace, ended up responding with a nod. Hatayama gave him a friendly smile and thanked him before going back into the classroom. Takaya thrust his hands into his pockets and headed back to his own class, looking over his shoulder after Hatayama.

(What the hell?)

This strange ghost phenomenon appearing with such frequency at Jouhoku High—the first case of injuries caused by these poltergeists appeared that day after class.

The place was the southern building's third-floor corridor.

Cracks ran through the windows along the corridor, and the glass suddenly shattered as if they'd been blown out of their frames. The members of the baseball team, who had been passing through, were struck

point-blank by the shards. They were taken to the hospital in ambulances, where they received stitches for lacerations that would take three to four weeks to heal. Since there was no evidence of stones thrown or any other clues as to the cause of the windows breaking, the teachers were left scratching their heads.

Among the students, the gossip was that it was, of course, the ghosts who'd done it. There was also corroborating testimony. A student who'd been nearby had witnessed everything, including a bloodstained man with a topknot standing quietly in white burial robes near the injured students.

It was the next day when Takaya heard about the incident. So it seemed that this would not be something he could ignore after all—and he needed a hand from Naoe and Ayako.

"The aura here is certainly getting stronger day by day, isn't it?"

They had assembled up on the deserted north building's roof during lunch. In addition to Naoe and Ayako, he had also included Saori, the

other interested party. Naoe looked around at his surroundings, arms folded. "It feels like more spirits have been gathering here over the past few days. This spiritual aura certainly did not exist when I came here a month ago."

"Ordinary people have seen the spirits, too. That's pretty bad..." Of the four, Ayako's expression was the most strained. "It wouldn't be so much of a problem if they were just hanging around, but now they've started hurting people. It could go downhill fast if we don't deal with this now."

"It wouldn't've been you guys who called them here, would it?" Takaya asked, leaning against the fence. "It's not because you came to [Matsumoto](#) that these ghosts started dropping in?"

"... No, things were already happening when we came here the other day."

"You just have great timing, then."

"So it would seem." Naoe's eyes narrowed. Takaya had apparently sensed that there was something more. There was, in fact, another reason for their being here in [Matsumoto](#), but Takaya, who had no concrete suspicions, said nothing further.

"In any case, we cannot take action without knowing something about the background of these spirits. What have you heard from those students who saw them?"

"Actually, I saw the ghost of a young woman, too." And he turned to Saori for confirmation. "There've been a lot of different ghosts

appearing, right? Like an old man and a kid..."

"Yeah. But there are some common features between them."

"Common features? Such as?"

"They all wear white kimonos." Takaya explained, "I've been asking my friends and stuff, and they said that the old man and the kid both looked like that woman from yesterday. They had hair like people from the [Edo Period](#) , and were pretty much all wearing white kimonos. Oh, and they were usually stained with blood. And there's one more thing."

"What is it?"

"This is from a friend too—he said that he heard a man's voice crying out from an empty music room."

"Crying out? Was it a scream?"

"It wasn't a scream... what'd he say it was, Morino?"

"Nitogoshou".

"Nitogoshou"?

"Yeah. He was sure that that's what the man's voice was shouting."

Ayako looked up at Naoe. "Nitogoshou? What does that mean?"

"Nito...2 to 5 shou ? Could it perhaps be the rice-measuring system from the [Edo Period](#) ?

Saori continued, "He said that the voice shouting "nitogoshou",

"nitogoshou" sounded really bitter. You know, I was kinda scared when he said that too, because it's just like the ghost stories I used to hear in Junior High."

"What kind of ghost stories?"

"Um...let's see. Well, actually, they said that there were traces of an old execution ground at our junior high school and that it had an interesting history..."

And Saori told them the story.

The junior high school Saori attended had been built some forty years ago. Many skeletons were found at the beginning of the construction of the school buildings and removed from the site. Afterwards, calamities such as strange illnesses and injuries started to befall those related to the construction—calamities which, it was said, suddenly and completely stopped after a memorial service was held for the remains. Even those who had fallen ill recovered. An investigation began with these events as impetus, and they discovered that the ringleaders of the 'Kasuke Uprising', which had taken place in [Matsumoto](#) in the Third Year of Joukyou (1686) during the early [Edo Period](#) , had been executed there.

"'Kasuke Uprising'?" Ayako questioned, and Takaya also nodded, his eyebrows drawn.

"I've heard about it. They taught us about it in elementary and junior high school. It's a part of the local history. Something about ten

thousand farmers marching to [Matsumoto Castle](#) to demand that their annual rice tax be reduced."

"[Matsumoto-han](#) ...yes, the uprising that occurred around [Mizuno](#) 's time?" Naoe nodded as well.

At that time, [Matsumoto-han](#) had been in dire financial straits, and the tax levied against farmers had been raised in an attempt to compensate. In [Matsumoto-han](#) , three [to](#) (one bagful of unhulled rice comes out to three [to](#) of unpolished rice after milling) was the yearly rice tax, but it was suddenly raised without warning to 3 [to](#) 5 [shou](#) in the third year of Joukyou. The farmers, whose lives were difficult

even at the best of times, were now burdened even further, and public outcry swelled up in resentment against the government's tyranny.

At a time when 2 [to](#) 5 [shou](#) was the standard tax, 3 [to](#) 5 [shou](#) was surpassingly cruel.

It was [Tada Kasuke](#) ,

the headman of Nakagaya village, and the headmen of other villages who stood up to demand a repeal of the raised taxes. They went to the castle on October 14th of that same year to submit a complaint to the government. One by one, the peasants of each village took up their hoes and their firehooks and gathered at the foot of [Matsumoto Castle](#) in support of the appeal. In the end the number of petitioners swelled to ten thousand people, an uprising on an unprecedented scale.

"So, the government was intimidated and allowed the repeal, didn't they?"

"Yeah. But the real goal of Kasuke and the others was to reduce the tax to the standard level of 2 [to](#) 5 [shou](#) . The government also agreed to this for the time being."

"Then wasn't it a huge victory?"

"Not really; you see—..."

The victory was not the end of it. Afterwards, the government decided to arrest the ringleaders, revoke the promise of 2 to 5 shou , and execute Kasuke and the others. And it didn't stop there. For not

only were the ringleaders executed, but also their families. Kasuke and the other headmen were crucified, their heads put on display within the city, and their corpses given to government officials for sword practice and the like in a particularly brutal display of tyranny.

The government probably meant it as a warning, but the punishment brought to bear against these innocent people was atrocious even by the standards of that time.

Such was the legend of the Kasuke Uprising and how the government revoked its promise of 2 to 5 shou to Kasuke and the others and put them to death.

It was said that just before his death, Kasuke fixed Matsumoto Castle with a glare so full of hatred that the main tower began to shake and tilt. (Before the renovation of the castle, its main tower did actually have a noticeable slant.)

On the crucifixion rack, Kasuke shouted at the distant Matsumoto Castle with every breath until his last: "It's 2 to 5 shou ! Don't forget! 2 to 5 shou ! 2 to 5 shou !"

The heroism of Kasuke and the others until the bitter last became the legend of the selfless martyrs of Matsumoto , a tale passed down through

the generations.

"So it was that...'nitogoshou'...?"

"...Yeah." Perhaps a bit touched by her own narrative, Saori sniffled.

"But that place where they were executed was at my junior high school.

People say that you can hear it sometimes, a voice shouting

Kasuke-san's last words: '2 to 5 shou !'"

"..."

"I've also heard stories of ghosts wearing white kimonos—just like now."

Naoe rested his chin against a hand in thought. "I see. The '2 to 5 shou ' part is now clear. But why would Kasuke's voice be heard here in this school?"

Ayako added, "Say that these people wearing white kimonos are the ghosts of those who were executed during the 'Kasuke Uprising'—it would

still be weird. They have no special connection to this school, so they shouldn't be causing this ruckus here, right?"

"That's true."

"Also, they would've become the jibakurei type of onryou ...so it's unimaginable that they would've just picked up and migrated here without reason."

Also true. The strong grudge remaining in the place where they had died or their hatred (towards someone or something) usually bound the onryou

to that piece of earth, and they seldom moved. It took a strong impetus to incite them.

Then what in the world had called them?

"I can't figure it out. Anyway, we should confirm whether or not they actually have any connection to the 'Kasuke Uprising'.

"Then we need to start with a reisaSaori-san, can you guide us around the junior high school you attended?"

"Eh?" Saori panicked on the spot. "M-m-me, guide you? No way, no way! I can't do that!"

"Is it not convenient?"

"N-no, that's not it! O-Ougi-kun, wh-wh-wh-what should I doooooo?!"

Saori thumped Takaya's back in single-minded agitation. Naoe replied for the nonplussed Takaya:

"... We must ask you to act as our guide."

It took around five minutes by car from Takaya's school to Saori's junior high, located at the foot of the Jouzan Hills , a place known in Matsumoto for its flower-viewing. A handsome monument stood now near the highway, and a 'Giminduka ' had been built to properly house the excavated remains of the twenty-eight individuals of the Kasuke Uprising .

A memorial service had been held for their spirits, and a memorial event took place here every year on the anniversary of their executions

to honor Kasuke and the others for their sacrifice.

Takaya and the others climbed out of Naoe's car.

"...So it's here...?"

"I don't sense any particularly evil spiritual auras. Shall we take a look at the tomb?"

The four stepped deeper inside, towards the 'Giminduka'.

In front of them was a modest plaza, and a luxuriant, hemispherical grave mound had been constructed beyond the fence and small shrine. In the quiet of that place they heard only the chirping of birds.

"So this is the 'Giminduka' where the remains of Kasuke and the others are buried?"

Naoe prompted, "...Haruie."

Ayako nodded and sat down in place with her legs crossed in the lotus position. She closed her eyes and relaxed her shoulders, breathing deeply in a slow, even rhythm to sweep away idle thoughts and focus her mind. Solemnity settled over her face. With the other three watching attentively, Ayako began the spiritual sensing.

Nothing moved.

Only the chatter of birds served as an accompaniment to the beams of sunlight streaming through the leaves overhead. Voices and the sound of bouncing balls came distantly from the direction of the junior high

school's gymnasium. Takaya and Naoe and Saori watched over Ayako from behind.

Ayako sat motionless with her eyes closed.

Her focused consciousness spread out of her still body, and she sought with all of her senses centered on the [reisa](#) for residues of thought from the past as well as signs of unpurified spirits.

Moment by moment, time was the only thing that moved.

Even the wind was still.

When Ayako finally opened her eyes, no more than five minutes had gone by. She let out a big breath before turning her attention to her companions.

"Are you done?"

"...yeah..."

"That was very fast."

"I couldn't keep my concentration any longer." Ayako turned, looking a bit tired. "I was trying to go up the stream of residual thought. This place really is Kасuke's execution ground. It left very intense traces of hatred."

"What of responses from the spirits?"

"There aren't any. The spirits of Kасuke and the others are no longer

here."

"No longer here?" Naoe asked. "Were they purified?"

"Nope. They weren't purified either, as we suspected. The aural patterns from the residual thoughts of the ghosts that've been appearing so frequently at [Jouhoku](#) High are a match. So it looks like those spirits really are the ones from the Kасuke Uprising."

"What do you mean?"

Ayako stood and replied, "There are traces that someone performed a reidouhou here very recently."

"What?" Naoe said.

Takaya asked Naoe in turn, "What's that? That reidouhou thing?"

"It's a ceremony for the guiding of souls. It means that someone has released the bindings that tied the spirits of Kасuke and the others to this place and lured them away."

"Is something like that even possible?"

Ayako looked towards the '[Giminduka](#)' grimly.

"But this wasn't just any [reidouhou](#). The nature of the residual auras here is totally different from the malice we saw at [Jouhoku](#) High. This is actually a protective force. The memorial service that

took place here was performed with such warmth and sincerity that it changed the [onryou](#) of Kасuke and the others into shugorei. But since their spirits had completely reverted back to the malicious [onryou](#) from

what we saw at Jouhoku High, this was probably..."

Naoe was the first to say it. "Anji reidou," he finished in a low voice.

Ayako nodded in agreement, her expression hard.

Naoe scowled, chin resting in one hand.

"...This is becoming ugly..."

"Wait wait wait! You've totally lost me. Stop speaking in technical babble and explain it so that we can understand it too!"

"..."

Naoe looked up at Takaya at his shout and exhaled a sigh that must surely have had some degree of annoyance in it. It was perhaps at such times that his lack of memory was most troublesome.

"In other words, it looks like someone hypnotized Kasuke and the others. They became the guardians and protectors of this place after the memorial service revived their conscience, but someone used hypnotism to call back the malice that was laid to peace within them, turning them back into evil onryou."

"Hypnotism on a ghost..."

"It is not impossible." Naoe's unwavering eyes narrowed. "Spirits are also human. The only difference between us and them is that they do not have bodies. Only, because their most primitive emotions are laid bare, they are that much easier to manipulate. It is especially dangerous for

those [shugorei](#) who were once [onryou](#) ; in the depths of their hearts there are many places that may conceal the darker emotions.

"—"

"Someone is probably using the hatred and <<power>> of the spirits of the [Kasuke Uprising](#) ."

"Using? For what?"

"Well..." Naoe thought for a bit, his brows knit. "There should be some purpose behind it if someone is going so far as to performing an [anji reidou](#) to call them to [Jouhoku](#) High."

"Is there something at my school?"

"A reason for calling them to that school... Could it be—" Ayako murmured, looking towards Takaya. "Could it be that the purpose is...Kagetora..."

"?"

"You...?"

Naoe raised his head at Ayako's words. Saori also turned her attention to Takaya. He glared, startled.

"Me? Why me? That's nuts!"

"Is it the act of some [onshou](#) ?"

"I don't know, but you guys sure made a flashy enough announcement of Kagetora's reappearance. [Uesugi Kagetora](#) would be considered a threat

to be eliminated by all of the onshou . It wouldn't be surprising for any of them to want to kill him."

Indeed, it was not unheard-of for an onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> to carry such <<powers>>. And the onshou certainly did not appreciate this ability to force-expel spirits to the other world called <<choubukuryoku >>. Of course, Kagetora's return was not welcome news to them either. Naoe returned Takaya's gaze steadily.

"It does seem like the target here is you, Takaya-san."

"That's not...that's—no way! That's totally insane!"

"O-O-O-Ougi-kun! I'm going to fire you as a friend for the time being. I hope you become a Buddha in your next life, okay?"

"Morinooo!"

He appeared to be in quite a pickle. If it was true, then the reason for the ghost riots at Jouhoku High was none other than he himself.

"However, we have no definitive evidence, so we cannot say for certain."

Even so, Naoe's expression was hard. He probably also had vague misgivings that this was the case.

Takaya narrowed his eyes to long slits. "Why does the target have to be me?"

"Please don't point any fingers. This would have happened sooner or later, now that you have a part of your <<powers>> back."

"I'm not Kagetora—!"

"Are you going to continue denying it at this late date? Please stop this childish pretense."

"—"

At a loss for a response, Takaya sulked in silence. Naoe, deep in thought, ignored him.

"But who in the world would..."

"Someone who could perform an [anji reidou](#) would have considerable <<powers>>, I would think. That would limit it to...hmm. But they would have to have the awareness as well..."

Takaya jerked at Ayako's words.

Awareness.

The one who had given the spirits of the [Kasuke Uprising](#) the suggestion to call them to [Jouhoku](#) High.

The strange events which had begun at almost the same time.

The student who had hypnotized all his classmates so that no one would notice him.

Hypnotized...

Could it be...

(Chiaki...!)

Naoe noticed Takaya's start.

"? Takaya-san?"

"..."

Takaya's lips were pressed tightly closed, his hands clenched into fists. Could Chiaki be one of the [onshou](#) from the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>?

If that were true, it would explain everything. He had insinuated himself into the school in order to get at Kagetora. Those strange events at [Jouhoku](#) High. The hypnotized souls of Kasuke and the others.

"Naoe..."

"? Yes."

"Let's go back to the school. Before the students go home."

"You've thought of something."

"I'm gonna talk to him face to face." Takaya fixed a glare on the empty air. "No way I'm gonna let him keep them hypnotized."

"..."

Naoe eyed Takaya coolly. Enmity towards Chiaki had already sprouted in Takaya's mind; seeing it, Naoe's gaze shifted slightly.

The tranquil chime of bells signaling the end of classes sounded strangely out of place within the strained atmosphere of [Jouhoku](#) High. That this tension had been engendered by the malice-filled spirits of [Tada Kasuke](#)

and the other spirits of the [Kasuke Uprising](#) was, for the time being, something known only to Takaya, Naoe, Ayako, and Saori.

Or, perhaps...

"Is this really okay, Naoe?" Ayako asked worriedly, standing next to the parked Benz near the school gates. "Should we have let Kagetora go by himself?"

"We don't know his intentions either," Naoe replied, holding a light up to the cigarette between his lips and not looking particularly concerned. "He must have had a reason for sneaking in like this. It would not be a good idea for us to bumble into forced contact with him."

"But Kagetora seems to be jumping to conclusions.

"Not without reason. However, the problem is finding the real culprit, who is probably already quite close. But what in the world is he hoping to accomplish by using the Kasuke spirits?"

Standing motionless, Ayako pondered the question grimly. That they had not yet seen the form of their opponent was an ominous sign.

"Probably because if he used the local [jibakurei](#), we cannot use our power offensively. [Reidouhou](#) itself cannot be done without considerable power."

"Not your common [onshou](#), then?"

"But what should we do? If this continues, we'll have to perform [choubuku](#) on the Kasuke spirits to protect Kagetora."

Naoe, his glare fixed on the asphalt, was silent for a brief moment.

"That may be true. Without another suggestion, they probably cannot go back to being the good [shugorei](#) . If only we could remove the suggestion that was cast on them..."

Ayako said, her face hard, "So we have no choice but to ask *him* for a favor?"

"Our opponent is someone with the <<power>> to perform [anji reidou](#) . I don't know if even *his* powers of suggestion are up to par."

"Ugh—..." Ayako groaned, her brows creased. "I just wanted to see Kagetora, but of course we had to get some party-crashers—"

"Our combat strength is now at its full, but the problem is the essential Kagetora-sama."

Naoe's worries rested on this point. Takaya's <<powers>> were not yet completely awakened, and his insecurities were only stifling those powers further... Would he be able to call upon them at need? It was more and more problematic that he couldn't use them, and when his life hung in the balance...

His life...?

"What does life matter to you?"

The words Takaya had once said to him suddenly echoed again in his ears. At the time they had angered him, and he had responded with unthinking sarcasm. But now Takaya himself realized that these words had rebounded on him.

For him, for the **kanshousha** that he was, what was this thing called 'life'?

(For him...)

Naoe's gaze fell slightly.

(He seems to have circled back to the beginning, to that same pain.)

He hadn't been able to do it, after all—he hadn't been able to look away. If Naoe could explain that this, too, was inevitable, he wouldn't feel such pain. It would set him free. If he could just explain...

(...Could it really bring him comfort?)

Naoe's eyes suddenly lifted. Leaden clouds cast their heavy shadows upon the white school buildings.

One chance to sweep the slate clean.

Kagetora had probably chosen to take this gamble. But had he understood that this chance to start over again also meant that the past he had wanted to abandon might repeat itself? And had he accepted that it could give birth to more brutal consequences still?

Despite knowing this, he had felt himself left with no alternative but to choose the possibilities. ...He had been driven into a corner with no way out.

(And I drove him...)

"You alone I shall never forgive for all eternity!"

The cigarette glowed. Standing motionless, his brows knit as he stared down at the ground.

I know.

That the past does not disappear.

That my own confusion and impatience drove him into that corner.

That my hideous desires wounded him.

These things could not be erased. Even if he had forgotten, he had not forgiven.

This unfading sin etched into his soul— When Kagetora regained his memories... When he remembered everything....

Naoe would probably no longer be allowed to remain by his side.

And yet... And yet.

This time, at least, let me give that person a place where he can cry. Let me be able to protect him.

Even if, this second time...

Let it not happen again.

(—Let me do what I can, now...)

A strong wind began to blow.

He felt the whole of himself judged and condemned.

Naoe opened his eyes.

The rooftop after classes. An empty can tumbled on the concrete. Chiaki turned his face away a little from the growing wind and opened his mouth to speak.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"..."

Takaya glared at Chiaki full-on.



He had returned to the school and called Chiaki out here at the end of classes. The hostility glittering in his eyes precluded all caution.

Takaya finally asked menacingly, "What are you after?"

"—"

Chiaki returned his gaze impassively.

"'After'?"

"Playing dumb won't do you any good, Chiaki. It looks like your hypnotism won't work on me."

"... Hmm." Chiaki smiled audaciously. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"!"

Takaya seized Chiaki's collar violently. "You think you can keep playing innocent?"

"..."

"You hypnotized my classmates so you could slip into the class, you called the Kasuke spirits, all so you could...!"

"So I could...?" Chiaki scoffed. "And what did you think I would do?"

"...ss...!"

He grabbed Takaya's wrist in turn. Takaya involuntarily released Chiaki's collar as the bones of his wrist grated.

"...Damn...you..."

"Rather rash of you, isn't it? Talking alone to someone who might kill you?"

"!"

"You might as well send out an invitation."

"So you really are...!"

"Stop your whining," Chiaki interrupted him, and Takaya gulped down the rest of his words.

Chiaki gazed at him with eyes as calm as a waveless lake surface.

"You've become a total brat since the last time I saw you. Stop blundering about. If you try to stick your nose in without the full use of your <<powers>> when you're this clueless, you'll seriously get yourself killed."

"Chiaki, you..."

"If you value this current body of yours, you'll stop being childish and let them protect you."

"..."

Takaya's breath stilled as he looked at Chiaki.

(Who in the world is he?)

Chiaki declared in a bored voice, "Humph. Your face is practically shouting that you really don't remember anything. What a carefree guy."

Jeez."

"... Are you on my side?"

"Though it really rubs me the wrong way when you put it like that."

Chiaki took a long hard look at Takaya's face and muttered, "But you know..."

"?"

"Naoe's pretty ballsy too, if he's able to face you. Well, it's been thirty years, I suppose?"

"Huh?"

Takaya gave him a blank look, but Chiaki appeared to be speaking to himself with no intention of making a reply. Takaya frowned at the incomprehensible words.

Just then.

A terrible sound came from the floor underneath them.

"!"

They turned at the same time. What was that just now?

"Below us is...the entrance."

"—!..."

Takaya took off running like a shot bullet. Chiaki, startled, shouted:
"Kagetora!"

The apprehension shivering through his body was fast becoming reality.

Chapter 6: The Solitary Shield

A tableau of disaster awaited him.

The terrible sound had come from the students' entrance. Takaya arrived at a gallop at the same time as the teachers, bare moments after the accident had occurred.

The breath caught in his throat.

All of the **geta** -racks at the entrance had collapsed.

He could hear the groaning of trapped students and see their arms and legs crushed beneath the racks.

"Uuuugh..."

A dark puddle of blood stained the floor at his feet. He could see what looked like a female student's hair underneath the racks, as well as the motionless shape of a human foot.

A student who had escaped harm by a hair's breath was sitting on the floor in a daze. Her friend screamed her name from where she lay pinned.

He staggered.

(Wh...)

He could not recall any words with which to speak.

(This...)

"Everyone who's here, please help raise the **geta** -racks! Suzuki-sensei, call an ambulance!"

"Yes!"

The students sprung into action at the direction of the teachers. Chaos instantly descended upon the entranceway. Next to the motionless Takaya, a student who appeared to have witnessed the accident desperately appealed to anyone who might listen.

"It's true! We didn't do anything, they just suddenly collapsed! All by themselves!"

(!)

This time he stopped breathing altogether.

By themselves? Did he say that they had collapsed all by themselves, just like that?

"I swear! We didn't do anything at all!"

The student's pleading voice receded from Takaya's hearing.

The baseball team members' injuries from yesterday. The windows which had shattered on their own. These **geta** -racks which had collapsed by themselves. The bloodstained, white-clothed...

"!"

Feeling a shock as if ice-cold water had been poured down his back,

Takaya spun sharply.

He froze.

Ghosts in white burial robes stood behind the scene of the accident as if looking over the chaos. There appeared to be around twelve of them all together. They were as immaterial as smoke, but that wasn't enough to conceal the crumbled ruins of their faces, the wounds torn into their bodies, the matted, disheveled hair coming out of their topknots...the gazes full of hatred.

The ice crawled up his back, and he shuddered.

(They...)

This was the first time he had ever experienced true malice. It felt as if he had been flung into the depths of an abyss of cold stagnant mud: a black, bottomless abyss of hatred and despair.

It was repulsive.

Repulsive—his entire body shouted that word, and he instinctively hugged himself. He could hear a low voice...a crowd's voice. It grew louder and louder, pressing against Takaya's ears.

<<Nitogoshoooo...>>

<<Nitogoshoooo...>>

That directionless malice closed in upon him, and he involuntarily put his hands up to his ears. He pressed hard in an attempt to block out

the voices, but they only echoed more loudly within his mind.

<<Nitogoshoooo...>>

<<Nitogoshoooo...>>

He shook his head, unable to stand it. The voices of the **onryou** . Resentful voices full of hatred. He couldn't block it out!

(Stop it!)

A frozen silence. The ghosts stiffened as if they had been shot, then turned into mist and faded away.

But their leaving could not return things to normal.

(**Tada Kasuke** ...)

That name alone remained, echoing in his ears. Takaya finally raised his head. The trapped students calling out for help were being helped out.

Bloodstains. Shoes with holes. Unconscious students.

He bit his lips and clenched his hands into fists.

(Is this...because of me?)

His eyes half-closed in anguish.

(This is my fault, too?)

The ambulances' sirens drew ever closer.

Takaya alone stood stock-still within the swirling chaos.

It was raining.

He had refused Naoe's offer of a ride and started back alone. The rain gradually grew more violent, but Takaya, umbrellaless, walked the drenched streets unhurriedly, shoulders hunched.

(What should I do...?) He murmured the question deep in his heart as raindrops beat down upon his body.

The others had presumed what he himself could not concede, the upshot of which had only been increased danger. Danger surrounded him on all sides.

He couldn't convince himself.

Even now, no matter how much Naoe and the others spoke of Kagetora, Takaya couldn't think about himself in those terms. He had neither the memories nor the power. He had never wanted anything to do with the <<Yami-Sengoku >> in the first place.

(Why did this happen?)

His gaze dropped to the asphalt.

(What should I do...?)

Water dripped from his hair.

He wasn't Uesugi Kagetora .

Perhaps the truth was merely that the shadow of this stranger named Kagetora had attached itself to him; what Naoe and the others saw was not the person called Ougi Takaya, but this shadow. And no matter what he said, Naoe *wanted* him to be "Uesugi Kagetora ".

(What if he's wrong...?)

Doubt flashed through his chest.

(What if I'm not him?)

Anxiety pushed up from the depths of his mind. Anxiety—no, fear was probably closer to the truth. Fear of being unable to resist them even if they impelled him onto this path. Fear of being forced to bear responsibility for all the unhappiness around them.

Bewilderment and helplessness choked him with despair. Because of the violent shock he had received earlier? Or perhaps because of his wretched state as the cold rain struck against his solitary figure.

...His heart trembled.

What was he doing?

(What should I do...?)

He was cold. He wanted warmth.

That fact alone he could resolve.

He understood—he realized that he felt as if he had rejected them.

He understood...

Naoe's expression as they'd parted surfaced in his mind.

Yes, he had refused Naoe's offer to take him home. In all honesty, he hadn't wanted see their faces. He hadn't wanted to reply to what they would say to him about taking action. Instead, he had recklessly turned his back on them and walked away, clinging to the belief his present suffering was caused by their insistence that he was Kagetora— But.

There had been a part of him that had wanted them to come after him.

(? That can't be true.)

Where had that thought come from?

But when he had yearned for warmth, it had been Naoe's face, full of worry for him, which had rising unbidden to his mind.

Takaya started at the sudden realization.

(Was I looking for a response from him?)

Confused by that thought, he instantly denied it. It couldn't be true, and it wasn't. It wasn't true...wasn't...

He stopped dead amidst the falling rain.

(That's not it.)

The truth stunned him.

He had wanted to have someone by his side, to have someone protect him.

(That's—insane...)

Had he become so gutless? Him? So much so that he wanted to be protected by someone else?

He was instantly terrified. He suddenly noticed how weak he felt. A dulled blade: the hostility that he had clung to as a weapon crumbled within him.

Takaya waged a ferocious battle against himself.

Against the need to be protected, against the desire for shelter.

He would be damned if he let himself go down that path.

But though he might conquer himself, he knew that the longing still existed. If he continued on this course, he would be swept away by this stupid desire to depend on someone else.

What should he do? With these unnerving thoughts—with his own weakness? He could not allow himself to be weak.

And even that was not as terrifying as needing someone.

If he recalled the sense of security that came from being protected, he would no longer be able to fight. He'd be done for.

(I...)

Takaya warned himself desperately, (I can't let myself be weak!)

What should he do?

The conflicting emotions churned into a muddy sludge and unbalanced everything that he had known about himself.

Laziness assaulted him in its turn. Why shouldn't he seek warmth? Why shouldn't he just entrust everything to someone else?

No, he couldn't.

He *couldn't*!

He couldn't allow himself to take shelter. He couldn't rely on anyone but himself. If he let someone protect him now, he would lose all of the weapons he had amassed so painstakingly over the course of these past five years. He understood his own brittleness well. If he knew warmth, he would no longer be able to compete. He would no longer be able to bare his fangs. This was he feared, if fear it was.

And so he had refused. He had completely rejected even that meager offer of shelter.

And yet...

(—Would I have been able to obtain that...?)

He closed unyielding eyes. Even in the midst of his defiance, he thought:

(If I were Kagetora...)

A puddle of cold rain water accumulated at his feet. His body was chilled to the core.

He climbed the narrow staircase of a multi-apartment complex and came to a stop in front of the steel door labeled number 302. He dug out his key, but surprisingly the door was unlocked. His little sister seemed to have gotten home before him.

"I'm home. ...Miya?"

Miya, wearing an apron, poked her head out of the kitchen at the sound of his voice.

"Welcome ba... Oh no, what happened?! Oniichan , you're soaked!"

"Yeah."

"You didn't bring an umbrella, did you! Hurry up and change your clothes! You're going to catch a cold!"

She clattered off to bring him a towel, then tugged him into the bathroom.

"You're cold as ice! You should take a shower. You're going to get a fever if you stay like this!"

"Mi...Miya!"

"I've turned on the hot water, so go take a shower. I'll bring you a change of

clothes, too."

And Miya was off again. Takaya took another look at himself, then began to strip off the shirt clinging to his dripping body.

After a hot shower had warmed him back up, Takaya put on the logoed T-shirt and jeans Miya had brought him and walked out to the dining room.

"You're pretty early today."

"Yeah. The teacher had stuff to take care of, so Club's been suspended in the meantime. I went to go get groceries, then came right home."

Shaking back long hair tied in a ladylike bow, Miya gave him an angelic smile and brought him some warm milk. Takaya sat down at the dinner table and cupped the hot mug in his hands.

Miya continued cutting up carrots diligently.

"What're you making?"

"Miya learned how to make hash beef with rice in home econ today, so that's what we're having for dinner."

"..."

Making hash beef from scratch the way Miya had learned seemed a rather tedious process. It would probably have been easier if they'd bought instant roux.

Takaya smiled without saying anything.

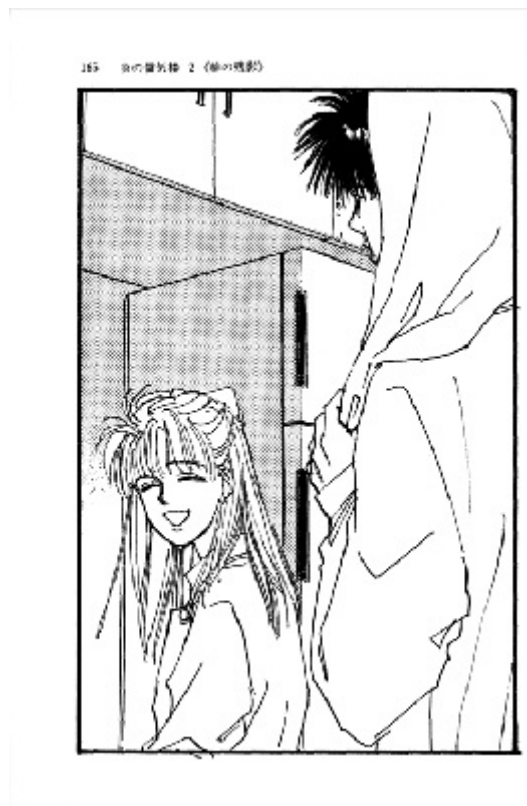
Ougi Miya. The sister Takaya had parted from at the age of three, who was now a second-year junior high student. Since she'd expected to be late coming home today because of after-school club activities, it'd been Takaya's turn to make dinner. But Miya had taken over instead, perhaps in rehearsal for her home econ class.

Takaya sipped at his hot milk, gazing at Miya as she happily made roux.

"Oh, Oniichan , Dad said that he got a new job."

"Our old man? He called?"

"Yeah. I guess he was a bit late getting home today, but it's really great about the job, isn't it?" Miya smiled happily. "Dad doesn't drink as much anymore, and he doesn't fight as much with you anymore, so Miya is really glad."



" ... "

"It'd be wonderful if he could keep this job for a while, wouldn't it?"

"... Yeah," Takaya replied in a low voice, and was silent once more.

Their parents had gotten divorced when Takaya had been a first-year junior high student. The reason had probably been their alcoholic father, who'd started drinking when his business had failed. Their mother had remarried and was now living in [Sendai](#) .

These past few years their father had been in and out of jobs, but was apparently finally settling down.

However, their family situation back then had been utterly terrible.

There had been a violent argument virtually every night; their father would go into a drunken frenzy, their mother would cry hysterically,

and the only thing Takaya had been able to do was to protect the frightened Miya and endure it all.

Their relatives and the other adults around them, fearing that the debt might somehow land upon their own shoulders, had extended only rancor and belittlement.

The kind uncles and aunts of old, their father's formerly loving friends—all of them turned their backs. Even Takaya and Miya, who knew nothing at all, were treated with as much coldness as if they were carriers of the plague. Takaya had no way out. The only thing that he could do was to become a shield to protect the young Miya.

No adult had given them protection.

Terror enough to make anyone bare their fangs. In his single-minded need to protect Miya, he neglected to defend himself. He recalled only taking the icy thrusts of their swords upon his own body.

(How many times has he said that?) Takaya wondered.

In actuality, he had never had the room to look back on himself.

Dog-eat-dog, hurt them before they hurt you—these were lessons Takaya

had probably also carried away from that time. But he had learned those lessons in order to protect another person, so above all he had endured.

Yet because of them, he was always on guard, always looking behind his back. Before he realized it, he had become the sort of person who would

never rely on someone else.

And yet...

(I endured because I could take it...)

He could be a shield—he could protect anyone.

He could take these deep wounds, and he would still climb to his feet without anyone's help. He could take all of the swords and arrows. He didn't need someone else to shield him at this late date. He would endure. He didn't need anyone to protect him.

(Why would I need someone else?)

He had never thought to have anyone. To hurt and to be hurt: these past few years, his entire world had been attack and defense. It had worn him down, left no room for anything else...and eventually.

(—What do I hope to gain...?)

"Is onion soup okay? We still have some cans left. What do you think?
OniichanOniichan ?"

Miya said a bit more loudly, regarding the unresponsive Takaya dubiously. His head was bowed over the mug in his hands. His hands were shaking slightly.

"Oniichan , what's wrong? Are you cold?"

Takaya finally raised his head. Miya was looking at him worriedly.

Miya. This sister—his only sister, whom he had so desperately fought to protect.

(If I were really Kagetora.)

If he were [kanshousha](#) .

There should have been some other Ougi Takaya—the true Ougi Takaya—here

to protect Miya. Kagetora had stolen this body from the real Ougi Takaya. They said that he was Kagetora. But he didn't have Kagetora's memories. If nothing else, he was *not* [Uesugi Kagetora](#) .

He, who was not Kagetora.

He, who was not even Ougi Takaya.

Then, the one thinking these thoughts was...

(Who in the world am I...?)

Miya's face was full of worry.

"[Oniichan](#) ..."

"If I said I was sorry or that I lied to you!"

Hearing the echoes of words he had once said, Takaya smiled a small, pained smile.

(Even so, I was the one who wanted to protect Miya.)

It didn't matter who he was. Whether or not he was Kagetora was beside the point; if it was his fault that the students at Jouhoku High were being harmed—

He had to settle it.

(I don't need a hand from anyone.)

He had made his decision.

If it was because of him that someone might be injured.

(Let's go hunting.)

A distinctive feral spark gleamed sharply in Takaya's long, narrow eyes, filling them for a moment with battle-lust.

He would take them up on their challenge.

By himself.

A roused predator stared out of his eyes. Such power roiled up within him that it astonished him.

"Miya."

"Yes?"

"I'm going out tonight."

Miya's eyes widened. "Huh? You're going out? Then we should have dinner early. You'll eat before you go, right? I'll hurry up and finish, so you'll eat, right?"

That innocent reply left Takaya blank for a moment. He combed the hair out of his eyes and felt at last like he could smile again.

"...Yeah."

He had Miya. And he had Yuzuru.

That was enough.

The rain fell ever harder.

The wind shook the trees surrounding the school buildings. The rain struck against the windows. All the students had hurried home after club activities.

An empty Jouhoku High.

A shadow loitered at the foot of the pilos pillars in the deserted school.

"Are the preparations complete?"

A white light danced behind him.

It was a young man in school uniform.

<<Everything, Ranmaru -sama.>>

"Then all that's left is to wait for Kagetora's coming to spring the trap. The Nue-shuu will await my orders outside the barrier. I will need thy power only if something unexpected should occur."

<<Yes.>>

"Good. When the time comes, release the Kasuke spirits from their <<chains>>. Afterwards I shall let thee wreck thy violence to thy heart's content."

Listening to the howls of the trees, he muttered in a low voice to himself, "I've prepared your grave, Kagetora. Come quickly. There are a great many guests waiting for you."

The beating rain.

"Come to do your exorcism for the sake of these students. Let me see this <<power>> you used to crush [Shingen](#) .

His lips twisted into a smile.

"You'll make a wonderful tragic hero, Ougi-senpai."

The storm increased in violence.

Dark clouds loomed heavily over the school buildings.

The swirling malice dropped like a curtain of tragedy over [Jouhoku](#) High.

Chapter 7: The Trap

The phone rang at around eight. They had already finished dinner, a bit earlier than usual.

Miya, who was washing the dishes, dried her hands on her apron and went to answer it.

"Hello? This is Ougi."

"Ah, hi, this is Narita."

"Oh, Narita-san!"

The caller was Narita Yuzuru, who had stayed home from school today as Takaya had predicted.

"Good evening. Is Takaya there?"

"My brother just went out."

"He went out?" Yuzuru's voice sharpened. "Where? Did he say before he left?"

"Ah, no, he didn't say anything."

"Nothing at all? You have no idea where he might've gone?"

Yuzuru's tone, suddenly tinged with urgency, bewildered Miya.

"I...I don't know."

"How was he acting? Was he his usual self today?"

"Um..."

Miya thought back. Actually, he had seemed rather absent-minded and preoccupied, and a bit down.

As if he were brooding over something.

"Narita-san, has something happened to my brother? He didn't go over to your place?"

"...He...couldn't have..." Yuzuru said as if he'd just had some flash of premonition.

Feeling that Yuzuru's silence on the other end of the line must mean that some sort of disaster had occurred, Miya asked, "What's wrong? Is something going to happen to my brother? If he's gone out, is something going to..."

Yuzuru was silent for a moment with the phone in his hand. Then he said as calmly as he could, "It's probably nothing. I'm sure he'll be back soon, so don't worry."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Ah, sorry about that. Don't worry about it. Bye..."

Hurriedly hanging up, Yuzuru stood stock-still for a moment.

(Takaya...)

He'd had a nightmare.

Just moments ago.

He'd been dozing off on his bed. And then he had a sinister dream.

The ghost of the woman in the white kimono from yesterday stood by his bedside. She tried to say something to him—plead with him to save something? He followed her, and Takaya appeared in the dream. He was sprawled motionless on the ground, covered in blood. Blood spilled from his lips as he lay in the utter stillness of death.

(A nightmare...)

It'd shocked him so much that the memory alone made his heart pound.

Takaya's slack face in his dream had been so vividly real that it sent icy shivers up his spine.

(—Takaya...)

A dread that refused to go away. Yuzuru clenched his fists tightly. It had looked like their school. Takaya had gone out; could it have been...

(A prescient dream?)

He'd been anxious and impatient, and now he was seriously alarmed. Yuzuru stared out the window.

(What should I do?)

It rained harder and harder.

(I need to...yes. I need to tell someone. I have to tell someone!)

Yuzuru grabbed several volumes of student directories, picked up his shirt, and shot out into the hall. His father flagged him down mid-charge.

"Yuzuru. Where are you going?"

"I'm just going out for a bit!"

He flew out of the hall and took off running into the rain.

The pounding rain covered [Jouhoku](#) High School like a heavy gray curtain. A lone figure stood in front of the gates and looked up at the school buildings.

It was Ougi Takaya.

He threw away his umbrella and shouldered the wooden sword in his right hand. Wariness and battle-lust gleamed sharply from his ferocious eyes.

"..."

He'd still had no indication whatsoever that he could use any <<power>>. Actually, he had no certainty of any sort that he would be able to call on whatever <<power>> he might have even if he came face-to-face with the spirits of the [Kasuke Uprising](#). This show-down would be completely sink-or-swim.

To that he was resigned.

(To hell with <<choubukuryoku >>.)

His grip tightened on the wooden sword.

(I'll wipe the whole lot of 'em out just with these two hands.)

His glare fixed sharply on midair. Such intense battle-lust surged from the core of his body that he shivered. Tension and readiness for the fight. Just as his lips tightened—

He spun at the unexpected sense of a presence behind him.

"!"

Two people had appeared beneath the dim glow of a streetlight.

Takaya's eyes widened involuntarily.

"—Naoe..."

"So you really did come."

Naoe drew closer despite Takaya's water-logged state. Ayako, holding a red umbrella, looked at him in amazement.

"He predicted your actions to a tee, jeez."

"..."

Takaya glared at them furiously. "Go home."

Naoe's eyes snapped wide. Takaya declared coldly, "I don't need your help. I've come to settle my own score. I don't need any help from you."

...So leave!"

"What did you say?!" Ayako ground out. "We came all this way to give you a hand, and this is how you treat us? I can't believe this attitude...!"

"Haruie," Naoe stopped her coolly, and turned to Takaya. "Is that a command from Uesugi Kagetora?"

"...!..."

"If so, we shall obey. However, if it is a command from Ougi Takaya, then we cannot oblige."

"Naoe..."

"We came to perform choubuku on the onryou in this school. We are not here to assist anyone." Naoe's eyes laughed.

"Please don't mind us. Do as you wish, and we will do likewise."

"..."

Takaya made no reply.

Despite what he'd just said, Naoe had no intention of leaving Takaya's side. Not while he refused to recognize himself as Kagetora.

Nothing for it.

Out-maneuvered, Takaya glared at Naoe resentfully before turning angrily on his heel. "Aaaah, fine, do whatever you want."

"..."

Naoe, for some reason, smiled slightly.

The rain and wind both grew stronger. The three of them stood in front of Jouhoku High School. The spirits of Tada Kasuke and the others were waiting inside—and so, too, perhaps, were those who had manipulated them.

(I am *not* going to let them keep doing it...) Takaya swore to himself, and took a step inside. Naoe and Ayako followed.

Jouhoku High in the rain. Strange pebbles were sown at regular intervals along its circumference. They didn't notice at all.

It was the "throwing stones" method of barrier-creation, a type of spiritual barrier normally used to seal Buddhist temples.

It was common knowledge to both Naoe and Ayako, but the darkness and rain acted to conceal the pebbles.

All unawares, they stepped into the trap awaiting them.

One of the doors to the staff entrance was open. It was usually locked at night to keep people from entering the school. But it was open now as if for their coming.

"?"

Takaya took a dubious step inside. In front of him was the business office. A guard would ordinarily have been on duty, but when he looked in, he saw that someone had laid waste to the empty room. One shoe had rolled to the door, and all was certainly not normal.

"What terrible malice," Ayako muttered in a choked voice. "If I were an ordinary person, I'd go crazy in here. I wouldn't be able to bear this place."

"..."

The guard had apparently run away, and not without reason. The <<spiritual malice>> here had increased to unbearable levels. Someone could be driven to insanity just by being here.

They saw no sign of the Kasuke spirits. But there was a sense like an electric shock that they had been noticed.

"Those bastards," Takaya groaned, wiping away the cold sweat running down his neck. Tension so thick that it was suffocating. His entire body had become a giant radar painfully attuned to the surrounding aura.

Naoe covered the agitated Takaya vigilantly from behind and to one side. He had mobilized each of his five senses as well as his Sixth Sense in order to protect Takaya with his <<powers>> from an attack from any angle, in any given moment.

Only the sound of the rain echoed down the corridor.

Light flared for a moment outside the windows. A flash of lightning. Thunder began to roar in the distance.

No movement within the charged atmosphere of the school. A cold aura.

"...!..."

Takaya stopped dead.

Naoe and Ayako went on guard at the same time. The end of the corridor was enshrouded in complete darkness; from there, the sound of damp footsteps approached. A lap-lap sound as if someone were moving through water. They could not see the owner of those footsteps. Only the sound approached.

A sense that it had stopped some meters in front of them.

In the next moment.

The fluorescent light overhead snapped.

"!"

Takaya and the others reflexively covered their heads and moved into battle formation. The crumbled pieces of the fluorescent light floated in the darkness. There was the sound of glass breaking violently.

"What...!"

Something began to dance and glitter in the darkness. The glimmering gradually increased, then multiplied exponentially.

It took them a moment to realize that the glittering was shards of broken glass reflecting the courtyard's electric lights.

Something sliced through the air.

"!"

Light skimmed across their razor edges. Those coruscating objects shot towards them like arrows.

"Kagetora-sama!"

Naoe instantly stepped in front of Takaya and encircled them with a <<goshinha >>. The mass of glass shards headed straight for them. Naoe increased the strength of the <<goshinha >> wall to repel the attack...

There was the thick sound of skin tearing.

"Naoe!"

Blood flew, and Naoe crumbled to the floor.

(Wh...) For a moment he was unable to comprehend what had just happened. (They cut through the <<goshinheki >>...!)

The glass shards had passed through the <<goshinheki >> barrier. No, that wasn't right. He couldn't...create the <<goshinha >> to make the <<goshinheki >>!

(That can't be...)

"They're coming!"

In the depths of the darkness a new mass of glass shards glittered. Naoe summoned the <<goshinha >>

once more. But his usual <<power>> did not spring forth

from his hands. No matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't call on

his <<power>>!

"Naoe! Get down!"

"!"

He ducked just as the glass shards skimmed over his head, missing him by a hair's breath. In his astonishment, his eyes were caught by a small piece of glass which had fallen to the ground. He tried to lift it with his mind, but it refused to move. It didn't even twitch.

(I can't use my <<powers>>...)

"Naoe, what's wrong?! Why aren't you protecting yourself?"

"I can't call a <<goshinha >> or <<nenpa >>," Naoe raised his voice impatiently. "I can't use my <<powers>>!"

"What did you say?!"

Bang!

The faucet exploded, and water came gushing out. A violent rapping started up around them, followed by the sound of something heavy breaking. All the florescent lights affixed to the ceiling broke simultaneously. The desks in the classrooms began to rock as if they were marking time. The three of them stood frozen.



"What do you mean, you can't use your <<powers>>?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I've lost them, or..."

"Naoe!"

They heard the sound of something rolling towards them from behind; in the next moment, a large object sailed past them with earth-shattering force.

"Waugh!"

The scales from the infirmary missed them by the slightest margin at a speed of nearly eighty kilometers per hour and crashed into the opposite wall.

"Eeeek, what was that just now?!"

"Haruie!"

"!"

She turned to see a flower vase right in front of her.

Whack!

The vase flew through the air and hit Ayako on the right side of her head with an awful crack.

"Haruie!"

Ayako collapsed soundlessly with a hand pressed against her head.

"Hey! Nee-san ! You okay?"

"The w...<<wall>> isn't working..." Ayako moaned. "Our <<powers>> aren't working, Naoeee!"

They were those who, in an emergency, erected instant barriers with their mind faster than their bodies could react. The <<wall>> was a fundamental means of self-protection in combat. And it wasn't working. Even this wasn't working.

They couldn't call on any of their <<powers>>.

Naoe felt blood oozing out of cuts all over his body.

Memory sparked. Another situation like this. When they could not call upon their <<powers>>. A long time ago, when they had suddenly lost the use of their <<powers>> in the same way,

when they could not protect themselves or draw upon their abilities. It had resulted in the deaths of their bodies.

That had been thirty years ago.

That unforgettable battle.

(Could this...be...)

"Naoe?"

Naoe muttered hoarsely, "It's a <<kyuuryoku-kekkai>>."

"!"

Ayako took in a quick stunned breath. Her face instantly paled. Takaya turned his gaze from the speechless Ayako back to Naoe.

"<<Kyuuryoku-kekkai>>?"

"Yes. Do you not remember? It's the same as then."

"I don't know anything! Just tell me!"

<<Kyuuryoku-kekkai>>.

It was a unique barrier which could absorb all the

<<power>> held by those trapped within its sphere. The master of the barrier (its maker) usually put considerable negative energy (such as anguish, enmity—the <<power>> released by the dark parts of the soul) into its creation, but there were also those who could use the <<powers>> of other souls to create

the barrier.

In other words, someone had performed [anji reidou](#) on the Kasuke spirits in order to create this <<kyuuryoku-kekkai>>.

They could not use their abilities, trapped as they were within the barrier. If they used their <<powers>> carelessly, it would all be stolen by their opponent, the maker of the barrier. Using the Kasuke spirits, the barrier-maker had inexhaustible <<power>> on their side.

And then—death by a thousand cuts.

"Isn't there anything we can do?!"

"There isn't. We cannot use <<[choubukuryoku](#)>> either. Until we break the barrier, our hands and feet are tied."

"Then let's go find the maker of the barrier or something...!"

"We'll probably be killed before that..."

The other side could do anything.

They didn't even have the ability to protect themselves.

"Then what should we do?!"

"..."

Neither Naoe nor Ayako replied. Without their <<powers>>, they were just ordinary people. Defenseless as they were, someone could

attack them with <<nenpa >>

without difficulty. For them, to whom power was a natural part of their being, its loss was terrifying. Gazing at Naoe and Ayako's taut faces, Takaya clenched his fist.

(You've gotta be shitting me.)

He couldn't die here. There were still things he needed to do. There were so many things he wanted to do. He had only lived for seventeen years. Because of this stranger named Kagetora...

(Am I gonna die here?!)

The door to a cleaning closet down the corridor opened, and all of the floor-brooms inside crashed to the floor. One floated up, and its handle turned to face Takaya and the others.

"!"

It shot towards them like an arrow.

"Kagetora-sama!"

"Fuck you, you bastard!"

He knocked it down with his wooden sword as it drew near. The other brooms attacked en masse. The thirst for blood rose in Takaya's eyes as he lost himself in the struggle to strike them aside.

"Come out, you asshole!"

"Watch out, Kagetora!"

From the entrance behind them, a locker squeezed out of the classroom into the corridor. All of the classroom doors clattered open, and one by one their gray lockers blocked the hall like a barricade.

The mass of lockers floated up from the ground.

"!"

They'd be flattened instantly. And they wouldn't be coming back to life. The cluster of gigantic steel lockers flew at them with a howl.

"Inside!"

Naoe's push sent them plunging into one of the classrooms. A terrible thunderous roar resounded from the corridor. The desks and chairs levitated as soon as they dove into the room and attacked the three of them from mid-air.

"Ugh!"

They tumbled back out into the corridor and slammed the door shut. The desks hit the door and fell to the ground.

They ran down the corridor. The windows along their path blew out one after another. Something pushed Takaya down from behind.

"Waah!"

He rolled on the floor and spun.

"Naoe!"

Naoe crouched on the ground next to him, a hand pressed against his shoulder. A large piece of glass had pierced his shoulder, and fresh blood stained his hand.

"Naoe!"

"Go!" Naoe cried. "It's dangerous inside the school! Hurry and get outside!"

"Wa...but—you!"

The shard had struck him squarely. Blood also flowed from his brow; his injuries were considerable.

"I'm fine—just go! Haruie, take Kagetora-sama!"

"Okay!"

"Wait, you idiot! I'm not going anywhere!" Takaya shouted from where he squatted next to Naoe. "Were you trying to protect me? Were you...!"

"What are you doing?! Hurry...!"

The glass shards behind Takaya floated up into the air and shot forward. Naoe wrapped his arms around Takaya without a word.

"I!"

Using his body as a shield, Naoe blocked all of the glass shards with his own flesh.

"Ah...!" he gasped, and crumbled against Takaya. Takaya held Naoe up, staring at his pain-wracked face. His hands were sticky with blood. Naoe murmured beneath ragged breaths, "Hurry...run...plea..."

Takaya's eyes widened. It was beyond bearing.

"Don't shield me, Naoe."

"Kage...tora...sa..."

"Stop shielding me, Naoe! You're gonna kill yourself!"

"What...are..."

"Why did you shield me! Why are you trying to protect me! Why!"

Naoe took in several gasping breaths. A slight smile appeared for a moment on his tortured face.

"If anything happened...to your body...there are people who would grieve...Takaya-san."

Takaya's eyes went wide.

"Naoe..."

"..."

Feeling a cold wind, Takaya turned.

Behind him, the ghosts of people who had died in antiquity appeared one by one. The ghosts of the Kasuke stood there, wrapped in their white burial robes. Deep rage and malice were etched into the pale faces of

these heroic souls.

<<Nitooo...goshooo...>>

Their resentful voices echoed as if from underground.

<<Do not break your promise...do not break your promise...>>

<<Nitoo...goshooo...>>

These noble souls who had gambled their lives to fight those in power for the sake of the common people.

"...Why?" Takaya murmured deep in his throat. "Why are you doing this? This is why you remained in this world?"

The Kasuke spirits made no reply, only repeating the same words: '2 to 5 shou '.

Spirits such as these had no logic and obeyed nothing but their most primitive emotions. They had neither rationality nor reason, only sorrow, hatred, resentment, rage. They acted only out of their unrequitable, unpurgeably pure, strong, deep emotions.

He understood.

Because he understood, he couldn't bear not saying it.

"That's not true, is it? You know, don't you? The enemies that you hated no longer exist. They died a long time ago."

The Kasuke spirits' expression did not change.

"Will you let yourselves be used in a place like this? You wanted to protect people, didn't you?"

<<...>>

"You wanted to protect them against the people that you hated, didn't you? You wanted to protect them against sorrow, right?!"

A white light rose up from the ghostly bodies of the Kasuke spirits.

"Are you going to just let yourselves be used like this? Do you want to be used?!"

"Kagetora-sama!"

The air froze.

He couldn't move. He was completely paralyzed. His breathing stopped.

He couldn't breathe. The Kasuke spirits gazed at them dully.

Directionless malice struck at them. The air was frozen.

<<Nitoo...goshooo...>>

<<Do not break your promise...do not forget...>>

Emptiness enveloped him. He couldn't breathe. He was suffocating!

(I don't believe this...)

The voices of the Kasuke echoed within his ears. He couldn't draw

breath. His heart raced violently, and the blood pounded in his veins.

Agony!

<<Do not break your promise...do not break your promise...>>

<<Nitoogoshooo...>>

Ayako stiffened against the wall. Naoe, crouched on the floor, was likewise motionless. He could hear nothing. His heart was going to explode. All resistance drained out of him as he slid into asphyxiation.

(Am I gonna die like this...!)

His eyeballs were boiling. His hands and feet had gone numb. He was losing consciousness.

(If we can just destroy the barrier!)

Only a <<power>> from outside the <<kyuuryoku-kekkai >> could break it. But they couldn't even call for help. Naoe tried to reach towards Takaya, but he couldn't move. He could hear only a buzzing in his ears and his own ragged pulse. Complete suffocation. An agony like death. It hurt. Oh, how it hurt!

Unthinkable agony!

(Someone...)

Reality became hazy. His consciousness receded.

Suddenly, a sensation of falling.

A single moment.

He felt somehow as if he could hear Yuzuru's voice.

<<Takaya!>>

At the same time, a terrible sound as if something were slicing through the air from behind them. The curtain around them collapsed; immediately afterwards, the ghosts of the Kasuke were blown away.

<<!>>

The ghosts tumbled and fell soundlessly. Their paralysis was lifted, and they dropped to the ground. Takaya lifted himself to his knees. His eyes widened.

(What!)

For a moment Naoe and Ayako were also quite unable to comprehend this turn of events. Someone had saved them. Someone had broken the <<kyuuryoku-kekkai >>

in the nick of time. A <<power>> from without. A <<power>> strong enough to break this barrier!

(Who!)

"Takaya!" a shrill voice called, and a young man sprinted down the corridor towards them. Takaya cried out involuntarily when he made out the running figure:

"Yuzuru!"

Yuzuru hurried to Takaya's side and hastily steadied him.

"Takaya! Are you okay? Are you injured?"

"Yuzuru, why are you..."

"! Kagetora-sama!"

He turned sharply at Naoe's voice.

Another person had appeared behind Yuzuru.

Takaya cried out a second time: "Chiaki...!"

"You've been done over pretty well huh, Kagetora?"

Chiaki Shuuhei approached them, thoroughly, coolly calm. Naoe and Ayako gazed at him motionlessly. He looked down at Naoe.

"Guess I somehow made it in time, Naoe."

"So it is you, Nagahide."

Chiaki Shuuhei—or [Yasuda Nagahide](#) . One of the five [kanshousha](#) of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) . A [kanshousha](#) second in power only to Kagetora himself. First in the <<power>> of suggestion.

"Nagahide?" Takaya suddenly remembered. "So...he's one of you. Then, Chiaki, you..."

"... Did you really not notice?"

Takaya was dumbfounded. Chiaki gazed around them.

"They laid a pretty nasty trap. But I'm not gonna let them use the same damn trick."

"Nagahide. Do you know who created the barrier?"

"Yeah." Chiaki narrowed dagger-edged eyes in anger. "That goody-two-shoes honors student who's been standing over there staring at us all this time." He called roughly down the corridor, "Come out, little frosh."

"..."

As if in response to Chiaki's voice, the slender figure of a young man appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

A flash of lightning illuminated the far reaches of the corridor. His face was revealed for a moment.

Takaya and Yuzuru cried out at the same time.

"Hatayama!"

A faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth, Hatayama Satoshi spoke for the first time.

"Hmm. Considering how much effort I put into that thing, you broke it much too quickly."

"Don't think you can write us off that easily, pretty boy," Chiaki retorted fearlessly. "You've made a big mistake if you think you can use the same trap again." And he ground out the young man's name: "Long

time no see, [Mori Ranmaru](#) ."



([Mori Ranmaru](#) ...?!)

Takaya and Yuzuru started. Naoe and Ayako glared at the young man called Hatayama with naked hostility.

Hatayama Satoshi—or [Mori Ranmaru](#) quietly smiled within the flashes of lightning.

Chapter 7: Death in Scarlet Glory

"I never thought that all of you would be here. I am overjoyed that we could meet again," Mori Ranmaru said, slowly folding his arms. "We may look different now than we

did thirty years ago, but I know. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. Kagetora."

"...!..."

Takaya raised his head, and Ranmaru smiled quietly.

"I feel sorry for you. You don't remember, do you? You don't remember anything at all? You can't even fully control your <<powers>> now. A pity. You don't know who you are, do you?"

"Wh...!" He yelled back unthinkingly, "Shut up! Damn you...!"

"But not without reason. You were truly in pitiable shape then."

"...!"

"It was terrible," Ranmaru murmured in a low voice. "You were in such a wretched state. Those closest to you had all been raped or killed, though they had no connection to this battle. All of the unhappiness around you had been piled on your shoulders, and you lived in misery. So you see, it was not without reason."

Takaya had no response to give. Ranmaru continued without pause, "Your

existence brought unhappiness upon everyone. It's because of you that they suffered. I can guess at your feelings."

"Wa-wait, you..."

"It's quite natural that you were unable to bear such an existence.

Your mission allowed you no place to run to, and only innocent bystanders died, one by one—I wonder that you were able to remain sane."

"..."

"I truly pity you. And that's not all. Because you were a victim, too.

Anyone would want to forget having such a terrible thing done to them.

Because you..."

"! ...Shut up, Ranmaru!"

It was Naoe who had suddenly cried out. Takaya turned. Chiaki and Ayako also stood watching.

Naoe glared at Ranmaru, shivering. Ranmaru returned the gaze serenely.

"...Hmm?" he murmured, then declared coldly, "Ah, of course... There are some parties here for whom Kagetora's loss of memory is rather convenient, aren't there?"

"!"

Naoe's expression stiffened. For a moment, Chiaki and Ayako's eyes were full of bitterness. Ranmaru's ruthless gaze—a cold gaze that knew

everything.

Takaya stared at Naoe.

"Nao...e...?"

"—"

Naoe's brows were drawn, his eyes averted from Takaya's face. He bit his lips as if enduring a rain of blows. A heavy silence...

"Shut up shut up shut up! How dare you! Who caused that suffering? Whose fault do you think it was?!"

"What is this? Making your adversary take the guilt for your comrade's shame?" Ranmaru smiled innocently, looking at Takaya. "In any case, with you here, we can't go all-out in our battle for this land. We will brook no interference. The other onshou are in agreement. Though we fight each other, on this point alone we agree."

"...!"

"In any era, the majority is in the right!" Ranmaru lifted his hand.

"Your shame and sin and suffering—all will be cleansed and erased when you go to that other world. I'll soon give you peace!"

A cold air sprang up.

The spirits of the Kasuke appeared once more like rising mist.

Controlled by Ranmaru, they approached step by step from front and back

to close in upon Takaya and the others. Hatred enveloped them. An evil

aura. Hatred transforming into the intent to kill.

<<We will not forgive...we will not forgive.>>

<<Those who broke their promise...we will send all of them to hell...>>

<<We remember our hatred...we remember our deaths...>>

The Kasuke spirits focused the hatred they had once directed at those in power at Takaya and the others. Murderous intent struck towards the five of them. Such terrible <<malice>>. They were going to be killed!

"Kagetora! We have to perform <<choubuku >> on them!" Chiaki yelled, joining his hands together in the ritual gesture.

Ayako cut him off sharply. "We can't! These people are shugorei ! They're just being controlled by hypnotic suggestion! They're not doing this of their own volition!"

"They've changed to onryou even if it's not of their volition! They're going to kill us!"

Light flared from the eyes of the Kasuke spirits. A <<nenpa >> which obviously held the power to kill flashed towards them.

"!"

Ayako promptly erected a <<wall>> to reflect it away and yelled, "We can't do <<choubuku >> on them! Their true will is to be shugorei ! They're not onryou !"

"Then what do we do, Kagetora?!"

Takaya hesitated. The Kasuke spirits had been turned back into [onryou](#) by a suggestion. Their hatred was real. But was it right to ignore their intention when they had been [shugorei](#) ? <<[Choubuku](#)>> would be the equivalent of killing these spirits. Was it right to

ignore the fact that they had remained in this world in order to protect people?

"Kagetora!"

"!"

The attacking spirits were enveloped in sparks and blown off by Naoe's <<[goshinha](#)>>.

"Kagetora-sama! The suggestion...!"

Takaya, lost in the moment, cried out: "Chiaki! Make the Kasuke spirits remember! Their own will! Their true will!"

"Their will's been erased by their hatred! I can't cancel the suggestion! They've been totally brainwashed!"

"Whatever, just turn them back to normal! We can't do <<[choubuku](#)>> on them!"

Clicking his tongue furiously, Chiaki focused his concentration. The Kasuke spirits reacted with surprise. Chiaki poured all his power into the hypnotic suggestion. For them to return to what they were. For them to turn back into guardian spirits.

The Kasuke spirits stopped moving. The waves of hatred suddenly lessened. A faint agitation passed through the group.

"You impudent little...!"

Ranmaru's eyes flared. He released a counter-flow of hypnotic suggestion toward the Kasuke spirits. Hatred. Malice. Resentment. Forgive no one!

The Kasuke spirits shuddered in agony.

The two sets of hypnotic suggestions jolted through the souls of the Kasuke. Hate. Do not hate. Do not forgive. Do not forget. No. Wrong. Suffering. Remember!

The spirits collapsed into confusion. These naked, weaponless souls were caught at the intersection of two ruthless streams of hypnotic suggestion. The defenseless spirits of the [Kasuke Uprising](#) , tormented into a state of panic. Emotions in agitation. Pushed beyond endurance.

All of the <<power>> they possessed burst out of them.

"!"

A terrible <<[nenpa](#) >> struck out at Takaya and the others. Ranmaru also instantly surrounded himself with a <<[goshinha](#) >>.

(Wh...!)

A shrieking wind like a beast's howling raged around them: the scream of the souls of the Kasuke.

(...!...)

Takaya immediately covered Yuzuru with a <<goshinha >>. Everyone protected themselves with their <<goshinha >> to the best of their ability, but no one could restrain the Kasuke

spirits. A horrible explosion. The souls of the Kasuke had gone mad.

(Oh shit!)

They had failed. The Kasuke spirits had thrown back the hypnotic suggestion and exploded into fury. The spirits could no longer be controlled. A brutal storm swallowed them.

"No, don't!" A voice cried out from behind him. "Don't! You mustn't let go of your true selves!"

Takaya spun. Yuzuru was staring straight in front of him, eyes wide in a desperate face.

"Yuzuru?"

"Calm down. Look at me!"

Everyone turned their attention to Yuzuru.

Yuzuru took a single step forward.

"Calm your hearts."

The storm gradually weakened. A muddy wind swirled in front of Yuzuru. Yuzuru extended his hand.

"Calm yourselves..."

The swirling darkened into mist, then separated and finally assumed their

natural human shapes.

They appeared in front of him. Twenty-eight men and women, youths and graybeards wearing white kimonos. They stared hatefully at Yuzuru.

Young children, haggard women, gaunt elders, wounded men. Their pale faces full of bitterness and hatred appealed to Yuzuru.

What could he say to them now? What could he say to plead for their lives?

The Kasuke themselves had not been allowed that. Their irreplaceable lives had been snatched away to set an example.

By deceitful men in power.

Those without power were not even allowed to cry out. To protest was a crime. The strong oppressed the weak. That was the natural order of the world.

Government officials who had broken their promise.

This regret. This hatred.

Never to be forgiven!

"Then what should we do?" Yuzuru asked haltingly with desperation in his eyes. "What should we do so that you will forgive? The ones that you hated are no longer here. You cannot take your revenge. So what can we do?"

The Kasuke spirits' hate-filled stare trembled slightly.

"What can we do that will let you be satisfied? Tell me. What can we do to give you peace?"

The spirits' eyes were tinged with bewilderment.

Yuzuru pleaded, "What should we do? What can we do? What do you want us to do?"

They only looked at Yuzuru. He put all of himself into the plea.

"We haven't forgotten you. We haven't forgotten what you've done, its meaning or your feelings. We haven't gotten! What should we do?!"

The cry that they had gambled their lives to give voice to came echoing back from three hundred years ago.

A cry raised towards the castle by a storm of voices.

"What is justice? What is courage? Think back, and you will surely remember! Don't let those things go to waste!"

Yuzuru's sincere gaze.

"Because you are our pride. Because you are a glory to those who live here in this land." Yuzuru slowly murmured, "We will always, always remember you..."

The Kasuke spirits made no reply.

Yuzuru begged them, "...Is that not enough? Is that not enough to repay you? ...Can we do nothing to requite you?"

<<—>>

"Is there nothing...we can do...to repay you...?"

Yuzuru's voice faded away.

The Kasuke spirits gazed at Yuzuru silently.

Takaya and the others' eyes widened, sensing that the surrounding aura had somehow been cleansed. And then something rose out of the group of ghosts facing Yuzuru.



A young child slowly approached him.

"..."

Yuzuru's gaze fell. The child looked straight at him. He reached out a hand to gather the child to him.

"I'm sorry..."

Words wrung from his heart.

"You will not be forgotten. You will never be forgotten."

Yuzuru closed his eyes.

"We will always think of you."

Please...be at peace.

A clear wind rose.

A gentle feeling within his arms. The child disappeared like dissolving mist.

The other Kasuke spirits had also disappeared.

Only a mysterious warmth remained.

No one spoke.

Yuzuru alone gazed into the distance as if at something unseen. A gentle wind embraced him.

A thank you.

"..."

When Yuzuru looked down, he felt the soft wind hugging him joyfully.

"...Yuzuru-san..."

"..."

Naoe approached him slowly. He came to stand beside the unmoving Yuzuru

and embraced his shoulders protectively. Yuzuru held onto Naoe, his shoulders shaking with suppressed tears.

The souls of Tada Kasuke and the others had disappeared.

"... I never thought that it would end like this."

Hatayama Satoshi—or Mori Ranmaru , also stared in dumbfounded surprise for a moment.

His hostile gaze finally returned to them. "Hah. I came here to amuse myself, but instead a treasure lands in my lap."

"What?!"

Ranmaru smiled coldly at the angry Takaya. "I didn't think to find something like this so close to you, Kage-tora. I'll be able to present Lord Nobunaga with a nice gift."

"! ...What the hell are you talking about, Ranmaru!"

"You will understand soon. Now, let's settle this! Go, my nue !"

"!"

The air shivered, and three huge black lumps appeared. In the middle of each lump was a human face: a hideous, hate-filled face dancing freely in midair. These were the **onryou** called the "**nue**" of **Oda Nobunaga** .

Ranmaru shouted loudly, "We have no need of the <<power>> of the **jibakurei** ! Oh, most strong **nue** of the Oda! Let their souls be rent apart here by thy power!"

The air howled.

The black faces opened their mouths wide and attacked. At the same time, Takaya called out, "Naoe! Take care of Yuzuru!"

"As you command!"

"Let's do it! Nagahide, Haruie!"

Hearing their agreement, Takaya joined his hands in front of his chest in the ritual gesture. The three of them called out at the same time:

"Bai!"

The three **nue** suddenly stiffened as if paralyzed. <<**Gebaku**>> had been cast on the target of the **choubuku** , and Nagahide and Ayako chanted the mantra of **Bishamonten** in ritual pose.

"**Noumakusanmanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka** !"

A shimmering luminescence rose from their bodies, and their hands began to glow with a white light. A concentration of <<power>>.

And then, as the shimmer flared into glorious flame, Takaya cried out loudly, "Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !"

He called towards heaven: "For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

He tore apart his glowing hands. The three of them cried at the same time: "<<Choubuku >>!"

A strong gale assaulted the nue .

<<—!>>

Countless lines of light shot through their bodies. In a moment the black lumps had been torn apart into a thousand pieces; the nue were scattered to the winds with a short agonized scream.

All that remained was a white gas that soon faded away. When the view cleared, they shouted:

"Ranmaru!"

But Ranmaru was already nowhere to be seen. All that remained was his echoing <<shinenha >>: <<I concede this match to you, Kagetora!>>

"What!" Takaya leaned forward, yelling, "Damn you, where did you go? Are you going to run away?"

<<My odds facing four of the Uesugi Yasha-shuu together is not to my liking. I will withdraw for now.>>

"I'm not going to let you escape, Ranmaru!"

<<When next we meet, I shall take that jewel from you. That moment will be your last.>>

"Wh...! Hatayama! Damn you!"

<<I shall report my find to Lord Nobunaga as well. Let us meet again, Ougi Takaya!"

"You bastard! Hatayamaaaa—!"

But his voice could no longer reach Ranmaru. Fading aura. Takaya stood frozen.

"..."

Mori Ranmaru : their old enemy, Oda Nobunaga 's right arm. Possessor of the terrible powers of hypnotic suggestion and spiritual sensing, a kanshousha of the Oda. Holder of a first-level ability to create the <<kyuuryoku-kekai >>.

Takaya bit his lips. The greatest of battles had now truly begun. Because they were threatened by the <<choubukuryoku >> of Kage-tora reborn, because they wanted to protect this <<Yami-Sengoku >>, their stage for a second chance to rule the world.

The time had come for them to cross swords once more with the Oda.

(Nobunaga...)

A bewildering, unutterable hatred stabbed out of his breast. And at the same time, equally strong—

Terror.

"—Kagetora..." Chiaki called from behind him. Takaya turned. Chiaki and Ayako. Naoe and Yuzuru.

Yuzuru was looking directly at him. There was no surprise in his expression. His unwavering, clear eyes were fixed on Takaya with concern.

Takaya's eyes half closed painfully.

(Yuzuru...)

His gaze moved to Naoe, standing next to Yuzuru. Naoe looked away, not meeting his eyes. It surprised Takaya.

"Naoe?"

"! ...Naoe-san!"

Naoe sank to the ground. Yuzuru hurriedly caught him. His face was drained of all color. He was lapsing into anemia.

"Na-Naoe! Hang on!" "Idiot, don't jolt him. A doctor—get a doctor!" Chiaki and Ayako clamored.

Yuzuru shouted desperately, "Naoe-san! Hang in there, Naoe-san!"

"..."

Takaya sat down by his side. "Naoe. Are you all right?"

"...Kagetora...sama..."

Supported by Yuzuru, Naoe lifted a colorless face twisted with the

agony of his injuries. Takaya shook his head and told Naoe to say nothing.

"We'll get you a doctor right now, so hold on for a little longer... ?"

His eyes suddenly opened wide. Naoe's right hand clung to his arm.

"Naoe?"

Naoe gripped Takaya's arm hard, his face bowed. His bloodstained hand clutched at Takaya with such desperation that it began to shake...

"..."

Takaya silently covered Naoe's hand with his right hand.

He turned to Chiaki and Ayako.

"We can at least stop the bleeding. [Nee-san](#) , see if the infirmary can be used? Yuzuru, call an ambulance..."

Chiaki cut him off.

"Don't bother. We have a car, don't we? I'll drive, so just hand over the keys."

"..."

Takaya looked blankly at Chiaki for a moment, then finally turned up his nose and smiled. "Humph. Don't get into an accident driving without a license."

"I'm not you, General."

And Chiaki grinned.

The rain outside had slowed to a light drizzle. The devastation of the corridor was apparent in the glow of the electric lights flowing in from the garden.

"You gonna be okay by yourself, Chiaki?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine," Chiaki waved a hand lightly, climbing into the Benz's driver's seat. "It'd look pretty weird if the noisy lot of us went, wouldn't it? You guys should get out of here too, before more trouble comes looking for you."

It was certainly true that if anyone saw the tempest in the school, they would have some explaining to do. Better that they pretended they had nothing at all to do with it.

"But can you really just pop in and see a doctor this late? Maybe we should just call an ambulance..."

"Idiot. There'd be trouble if we called someone curious enough to poke their nose into this. It'll be fine. I'll hypnotize a doctor or two, and that'll be that.

"... You're going to bewitch someone else?"

"Don't talk about me like I'm some kind of nine-tail fox or [tanuki](#) . Haruie, I'm leaving this lot to you."

Ayako replied sullenly, "I would've taken them home anyway."

Takaya snapped his mouth shut when he saw Naoe close pain-filled eyes in the passenger's seat.

"All right, see you later," Chiaki said, and stepped on the gas pedal.

The Benz glided off and disappeared into the rainy darkness.

Takaya, Yuzuru, and Ayako remained.

Yuzuru stood in a daze next to him.

"Yuzuru?"

"? ...oh, what?"

"What's wrong?"

Yuzuru tilted his head slightly. "Ah, nothing. I was thinking...so Chiaki really was one of your "comrades", huh...?"

"__"

Takaya stared at Yuzuru. Yuzuru— ...He began to wonder.

"... Yuzuru, why did you come here?"

"I had this weird dream. A dream where you were dead."

"..."

"It gave me this bad feeling, and I felt like I needed to let someone know about it—then suddenly I thought of Chiaki. I don't know why. But when I was running around trying to figure out how to get in touch with him, I looked in the class student directory, but couldn't find his address or anything."

"Yuzuru."

"I had no idea what to do—the next thing I knew, I was at the school, and there in front of the gates was Chiaki. I was so surprised." Yuzuru smiled. "But I'm so glad that you're okay..."

"—"

Looking at Yuzuru's familiar smile, Takaya suddenly muttered, "You're not gonna ask me about anything?"

"...?"

"About Chiaki. About Hatayama..."

About me.

Takaya fell silent.

Yuzuru smiled at him slightly and responded, "If I asked, would you tell me?"

"... Yuzuru."

Ayako slapped both of them on the shoulders.

"Hey, hey. All this friendship stuff is great and all, but if you guys keep standing there, you'll catch a cold. Your big sis'll take you home, so let's hurry up and get moving!"

"... Why'd we have to have you take us home?"

"I don't care you 'bout you, but I'm worried about this young man here. All right, come on, let's go."

And Ayako began walking with her hand on their shoulders. In actuality, Ayako was not just a little in awe of Yuzuru's powers.

Yuzuru, who had calmed the maddened spirits with such ease.

It had been no easy thing to curb the Kasuke spirits' explosion. Even Ranmaru had had no power to spare for anything except defending himself. Yuzuru had calmed the explosion, and even quite obviously dispersed the suggestion laid upon them.

And all unconsciously.

(This child's potential could trump even Kagetora's.)

"A threat to the Roku Dou Sekai ."

Kousaka's words echoed in her mind, and ice crawled down her spine.

What in the world lay inside of this mild, gentle-hearted young man before her?

Yuzuru, telling Takaya some piece of gossip.

Takaya's eyes as he listened.

It was easy to see from the gentleness in those eyes, from the unguarded expression and seldom-seen young man's smile that he showed freely to Yuzuru alone.

To Takaya, Yuzuru's existence was...

(I don't want to see him dragged into this—)

It was a thought that came naturally when she looked at this young man.

If Yuzuru alone could be allowed to remain as he was. She wanted him to always be allowed to live his life in peace.

(Though that's probably beyond my power...)

Ayako looked quietly up at the sky.

A dark sky filled with thousands of darts of falling rain.

No light shone.

"So...it really was you," Naoe murmured from the passenger's seat.

"?"

They had stopped in front of a red light, and Chiaki turned towards him.
"What?"

"You called me, didn't you? It was you...who sent that <<shinenha >>...to summon me to Matsumoto , wasn't it? Nagahide?"

"..."

Chiaki returned his gaze.

In actuality.

This was the other reason that had drawn Naoe and Ayako to [Matsumoto](#) on this trip. It had all begun about a week ago, when Naoe had caught a puzzling <<[shinenha](#)>> directed at him at his home.

<<Come to [Matsumoto](#) immediately.>>

<<Go to Kagetora's side.>>

He'd been in doubt because he had not been able to determine the source of the message. But just in case, he had picked up Haruie and set out for [Matsumoto](#) once more. He hadn't known until he passed Chiaki Shuuhei that day in front of the infirmary that he was, without a doubt, [Yasuda Nagahide](#), and that it was he who had sent the <<[shinenha](#)>>.

Nagahide had sent the <<[shinenha](#)>> to alert Naoe and Haruie of Kagetora's danger. It had saved Kagetora's life.

"Humph. Don't thank me for that. I have no intention of becoming involved with you lot."

"... So you're...back to that?"

"Shut up. I've made up my mind. I know nothing about any [Uesugi Kenshin](#). All this stuff about [onryou](#) subjugation and the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) —I have no connection to any of that. I never even planned to meet any of you this time. If you were thinking that I'd fight with you, you can think again."

Nagahide had suddenly cut off all communication with them around ten years ago. He had always had a peevish sort of personality, which had turned into complete disgust in the battle with Oda Nobunaga thirty years ago. Thereafter, he'd been totally disinclined to cooperate with Naoe and the others.

So why had Nagahide appeared now at Kagetora's side?

Breathing raggedly, Naoe gave Nagahide a sidelong glance.

"Who told you about...Kagetora-sama?"

"..."

"It couldn't have been a coincidence... If you wanted nothing to do with us...then why...were you there...with Kagetora-sama? Where did you hear about him...?"

Eyes looking ahead, Nagahide—Chiaki was silent for a moment. The wipers

flashed two, three times across the windshield. Then Chiaki responded in a low voice, "I saw Kousaka ."

"!" Naoe leaned forward. "Kousaka?"

"I heard about Kagetora from him. And about what happened with Shingen, about meeting you. It's not like I came here to be Kagetora's bodyguard. I only called you because when I got here, Ranmaru was targeting him, and there wasn't much else I could do."

"... So you have some other purpose."

"—"

"Is it—Narita Yuzuru?"



Nagahide looked at Naoe. "Naoe, he could be a threat of unimaginable proportions."

"What did you hear from Kousaka?"

"Humph. I don't think he told me everything. Those damned superior airs of his. He only hinted at things. That right now Narita Yuzuru, who is close to Kagetora, is our greatest threat. That if he fell into the hands of some careless onshou , we'd never be able to recover."

"..."

The light turned green, and Nagahide stepped on the gas.

"That depending on how he's handled, not only the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, but this world, could be destroyed. I got kinda worried when I heard that, so. I came to find out what I could about who he really is."

"And? Have you figured out anything?"

"If Haruie can't figure it out, how am I supposed to? I was only planning to observe Narita Yuzuru from a distance, but suddenly that idiot Ranmaru came to mess with Kagetora. I wasn't going to get involved, but if anything happened to Kagetora, you'd probably get depressed again, huh?"

"..."

"I noticed the anji reidou on the Kasuke spirits from a distance, and guessed that when you came you'd notice too. You'd probably start fighting at any moment. So I didn't have much choice but to slip into the class to protect Kagetora. You should be thanking me," Nagahide said all in one breath, and sighed. "But, well, I guess we have Narita Yuzuru to thank for earlier, huh?"

"?"

"He was the one who called me. He sent a <<shinenha >> to come and save you guys. Though he probably wasn't aware of it himself."

"So he..."

Nagahide cut the wheel left. "Humph. Not like it's any of my business whether you live or die."

"Nagahide..."

Gazing at the darts of rain illuminated by the headlights, Nagahide was silent. He was remembering back to the past.

What Ranmaru had said to Takaya weighed on his mind.

Nagahide murmured, "Naoe."

"...?"

"And what about you?"

Naoe turned his head slightly, uncertain of Nagahide's meaning.

Nagahide said in a slightly lower voice, "If you truly intend to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, Kageatora's current powers are not enough. You'd need to awaken all of his powers."

"..."

"He seems to have sealed his own memories. But without those memories he has no hope of using a hundred percent of his <<powers>>. If he's completely awakened, his memories will also return."

Naoe stared at the dashboard motionlessly.

"I don't know if that means that he would have to discard his current

personality, but if not, then you will not have power equal to what is needed to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >>."

Nagahide flicked on the left turn signal and brought the car onto the footpath.

"If Kagetora's memories do not return, you will not be able to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, Naoe."

"... I know."

"And are you okay with that? Kagetora will remember. He'll remember what happened."

"..."

"About you. About 'Minako'."

"Nagahide." Naoe said only that, and closed his mouth again.

Nagahide gazed at Naoe's bloodless profile silently.

"All right," he said, and opened the door.

The car was parked in front of one of the town's small surgical hospitals. Nagahide climbed out and stepped into the rain. He walked around to Naoe's side to help him out of the car.

"Can you walk?"

"...Yeah."

They waited as a car in the opposite lane ran a red light and sped

past. Nagahide muttered as they headed towards the hospital, "I'm sure you're the one who wants to run away most, Naoe."

Naoe's eyes lifted.

Nagahide walked beside him, his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet.

"But you can never leave Kagetora, can you?"

"__"

And Nagahide said nothing further. Naoe made no reply.

The rain fell incessantly.

Yes, he knew. In the end, he could never escape from this one unalterable path.

The rain trickled into the innermost depths of his breast.

The cold, cold rain.

Epilogue: Traces of the Selfless

Three days passed.

Of course, it was hardly surprising that the police would be called in the next morning to investigate the wrecked state of the school. But in the end, Takaya and company were left unquestioned, the culprit undetermined, the case unsolved.

And though the transfer student in Year 1 Group 5 stopped coming to school from that day forward, the [zashikiwarashi](#) in Year 2 Group 3 attended class per usual.

Apparently, he intended to stay.

Takaya next saw Naoe on the evening of the third day. His wounds appeared to have healed somewhat. He paid a visit to Takaya's home and invited him out for a drive.

To go see the sunset, he said.

Jouzan Park was [Matsumoto](#) 's famed site for sakura-viewing, located in the western part of the city on a low hill. The aforementioned [Giminduka](#) for Kasuke and the others of the Joukyou Selfless was also situated nearby.

At the top of the hill was a viewing platform from which one could see the whole of [Matsumoto City](#) in one unbroken sweep. It was also a superb place to see the sunset. Takaya led Naoe to the top of the platform.

"How...are you injuries?" Takaya finally asked amiably, looking at the bandage around Naoe's forehead. Naoe nodded dismissively.

"They're of no big concern. I'm sorry for having worried you."

"Why the hell would I be worried about you?"—Takaya's usual words never made it out of his mouth this time. Left without a reply, he combed his hair back several times. Naoe, sensing Takaya's discomfort, turned to

another subject.

"This is a wonderful view, isn't it? The city doesn't seem so big from here. So [Matsumoto](#) really is a city surrounded by mountains."

"You're saying that it's the sticks, aren't you?"

"No, that I'm envious. That you live in such a beautiful place."

"I guess it might seem that way to people from other parts. But it's the same as living anywhere else, probably."

Leaning against the railing, Naoe looked at Takaya. As usual, Takaya had a rather put out look on his face.

"Is this a bother?"

"No, it's not, but... It's just that usually only weird couples and stuff come here around now..."

Naoe's lips twitched into a slight, quiet smile. "And do you not have someone like that? A young woman who would come here with you?"

"What're you trying to say?"

"It would certainly not be out of the question for a young man of your age."

Takaya glared at Naoe, then abruptly turned his gaze towards the mountains.

"Are you angry?"

"Not really."

"You are a rather difficult person, aren't you."

Takaya retorted over his shoulder, "If I did, d'you think I'd be here with you now?"

"..."

Maybe Takaya really was mad, for he was still staring peevishly off into the distance. For some reason, it seemed rather funny to Naoe.

"Kasuke and the others..." Takaya murmured. "What happened to them? They never turned up again after they disappeared..."

"Who knows? Perhaps they went to the other world, or perhaps they calmed down and went back to that place to become [shugorei](#) once more."

"..."

"Whichever it is, in the end we were able to respect their true wishes. And it was all thanks to Yuzuru-san."

"The true wishes of spirits, huh..." Takaya gazed up at the sky. "I think I understand now what you meant when you said that 'spirits are the same as us'. Because even though they lived in the past, they're still people like us, right?"

"Yes," Naoe replied quietly. "So though we live in the present, we must not act with high-handed superiority. I believe that we should always face them as equals."

"..."

"But understanding makes it difficult, does it not? Strictly speaking, such thoughts would make it impossible for us to perform <<choubuku >>.

"That's true, but it's because they do harm that you perform <<choubuku >>, right? Because what's most important is 'those who live now'?"

"... Yes." Naoe looked towards the western sky. "By its nature, it is against the regular order of the world for those who have died to remain here. ...And yet again, if you think about it, we probably lived in the same era as they."

"..."

But—Naoe said with downcast eyes, "It's the people who live 'now' who are best able to repay them. We can capture the past accurately, we can strive to understand them with the right perspective—I think that this is the best way to requite them. And then we can endeavor to shape our 'now' into the world that they yearned for. "

"..."

"I believe that that is the best way to repay those who lived in the past."

Takaya gazed at his profile.

"—Naoe..."

Naoe smiled at him. "That is the meaning of the importance of 'now'."

Sunset at the western mountain range. The sun dyed the city of Matsumoto

red. Shades of scarlet spread outward from the point where the setting sun met the mountains.

How many times would the sun fall again after their last view of it this day?

Takaya heard a distant cry from beyond the sunset.

This sunset over the Matsumoto Plains which was unchanged now, three hundred years later.

(The most important thing is...)

Takaya wrapped his arms around himself in the summer-green wind, the Matsumoto Plains extending into the distance before him. He hugged himself, feeling small in the face of the deep history staining this land.

"...?"

His eyelids were falling shut when he felt warm air enveloping him from behind. He turned. Naoe was gazing at him gently.

"Naoe."

"..."

His eyes closed for a moment as he felt something cut asunder in his heart.

Naoe said, "I must ask you to accompany me before long."

"Me? Accompany you on what?"

"There's a report of a pattern of unrest among the [onshou](#) in the Northeast. They will start to influence the regular world at this rate, so they must be calmed."

"So you're going to hunt them down?"

"We have need of your <<power>>." Naoe said gravely, "You were able to perform <<[choubuku](#)>> on Oda's [nue](#) .

Your <<power>> is unstable, but it is not wholly unusable.

You may be uncertain in your control, but you will most likely gain greater mastery as you become more familiar with it. It would be somewhat precarious for us to deal with the Northeast by ourselves."

"Any names I'd recognize this time?"

"The Northeast lies within the influence of Mogami and Date. Their altercation is the cause of the unrest."

"Mogami? Date? Then..."

"This is to calm a dispute of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>. I will need you to go to [Sendai](#) before long."

Doubt filled Takaya's eyes.

"[Sendai](#) ...?"

Naoe, seeing it, asked uncertainly, "Takaya-san."

"... No, it's nothing."

Takaya's downcast eyes belied that statement. Naoe regarded him

skeptically, but withdrew a business card from his inner pocket and presented it to him.

"? What's this?"

"My contact information. If anything should happen, please call me."

There was another name written on the business card.

"Tachibana Yoshiaki'?"

"My current name. Please use this when others are present or when you need to reach me. ...What's wrong?"

Takaya was looking amazedly at Naoe.

"Does it not suit me?"

"It suits you so much that I wanna barf."

"I shall take that as a compliment. I generally work at home when I have no Buddhist or funeral services to perform."

"So you really *are* a Buddhist monk?"

"Yes. Is that not what I told you?"

"You crooked monk!"

The sun had fallen beneath the mountains long before the end of their playful exchange.

Bit by bit, house by house, lights twinkled into existence in the city.

Surrounded by the beautiful silhouettes of the mountains, lights appeared one after another on the Matsumoto Plains, shining, it seemed somehow, with such warmth.

"O-Oniichan !"

Climbing out of Naoe's Benz in front of the apartment complex, he saw Miya just as she was coming home from school. Takaya shouted at the same time:

"Wh-why the hell are you here, Chiaki!"

"O—!"

Chiaki was with Miya.

Their shouts clashed: "Look, Miya, why are you with him?!"

"O-O-O-Oniichan! Who's that? Are you being scouted by one of those people?" "You bastard! What are you doing here, Chiaki!"

Naoe in his black suit and sunglasses and Chiaki in his school uniform both sighed as they stared at the Ougi siblings kicking up a fuss.

"Like brother like sister..."

"Have you been waiting for that person, Nagahide?"

"Not really waiting... Well, since he helped out so much, I thought I'd say hi."

Actually, by previous arrangement, Chiaki was remaining in [Matsumoto](#) to become Kagetora's tutor.

"Chiaki, you bastard, are you making a move on Miya?"

"You act like you're her old man."

"So why the hell are you here?!"

"Don't be such a cold fish. I just came to tell you that I've rented a place in the neighborhood."

"Whaaaat—!"

He turned his glare on Naoe.

"Did you instigate this? Again?"

"Please stop tossing people into your conspiracy theories."



"What the hell are you guys thinking?"

"Oniichan!"

Shoulders heaving as he panted for breath, Takaya abruptly turned on his heels.

"Whatever! Let's go, Miya!"

"Oniichan!!"

Miya bowed towards Naoe and Chiaki slightly. Takaya's stomping footsteps continued for two, three more steps.

He suddenly stopped dead.

Looked back at Naoe and the others, gazing after him blankly—

Said: "Naoe...those injuries..."

"?"

The movement of his lips indicated that he had more to say, but he hesitated and gulped the words down before they could be vocalized.

"What is it?"

"..."

Takaya said crossly with his back turned, "Hurry up and get well."

Then he walked into the building with Miya in tow.

Naoe and Chiaki gazed after them.

"Rebellious, isn't he?"

"... You think so?"

"I'm glad that you guys seem to understand each other. You leaving now?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Oh, there's something I forgot to tell you the other day."

"What?"

"A message from Kousaka."

Naoe looked sharply at Chiaki, and Chiaki's expression also turned serious.

"He said to tell you, Naoe."

"..."

"Don't let Narita Yuzuru go unwatched'."

"!"

Naoe inhaled sharply and looked up at the streetlight next to Chiaki.

"Well, since I'll be with Kagetora, of course I'll keep an eye on Narita too, but how 'bout it, Naoe? Wanna enlist Narita Yuzuru?"

"What did you say?"

"I mean, look at his potential, even though we don't know what he is.

We should get him before someone who knows his true nature tries to use

him—it's not like we'll treat him badly or anything."

"You want to involve him?"

"He's already involved." Chiaki's eyes glittered. "Think about what Ranmaru said, that he'll get Narita someday. He seems to have inklings of something. They're gonna come after Narita Yuzuru next."

"!"

"If he falls into Oda's hands, it'll be like giving an ogre an iron club. Narita Yuzuru is a menace. Instead of leaving him alone, wouldn't it be better to make him one of us? That way we can always watch his back as well."

"... It'd probably be like sleeping with a bomb."

"At least we'll be prepared." Chiaki leaned against the Benz' door. "I could be imagining this, but it feels like Kagetora himself finds it easier to stabilize his <<power>> with Narita Yuzuru at his side. He would probably be great for support at this point..."

"At his side...? I can't really agree."

"You'll have to," Chiaki said, smiling sardonically. "That's the way it's working out, so there's not much you can do about it. Giving two

hundred percent is what you guys do. You'd even put your life into the bargain."

"..."

Glaring at Chiaki, Naoe climbed into the driver's seat. "And you? I thought this was none of your business."

"Humph. I'm just filling in for Old Man Irobe ,"

he replied, peering in at Naoe. "Since you guys are so short, I'm just giving you a hand for old times' sake. Don't make this out to be something it's not."

Naoe smiled ironically and turned the ignition. Though Nagahide's form had changed, he was the same obstinate person. This time around he and

Takaya would probably have a fine time butting heads. Oh, he was a bother, but still his inclusion was more reassuring than anything else.

"I leave Kagetora-sama to you, Nagahide."

"...humph," Chiaki responded testily, "don't get your hopes up."

Naoe lifted a cigarette to his mouth, just barely keeping his lips from twisting into a slight, bitter smile.

He lit the cigarette and shifted into gear. In the mirror Chiaki lifted his right hand slightly.

A "see you later."

Naoe nodded lightly and turned his focus to the front windshield.

He stepped on the accelerator.

END

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